

THE CONDITIONS OF BEING ART

Pat Hearn Gallery &
American Fine Arts, Co.

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QUEER DEFORMATIVITY: MARK MORRISROE, JACK PIERSON, AND JIMMY DE SANA AT PAT HEARN

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Nevertheless I am struck by the potential interest that might also lie in speculation about versions of performativity (okay, go ahead and call them “perversions”—or “deformatives”) that might begin by placing some different kinds of utterance in the position of the exemplary.

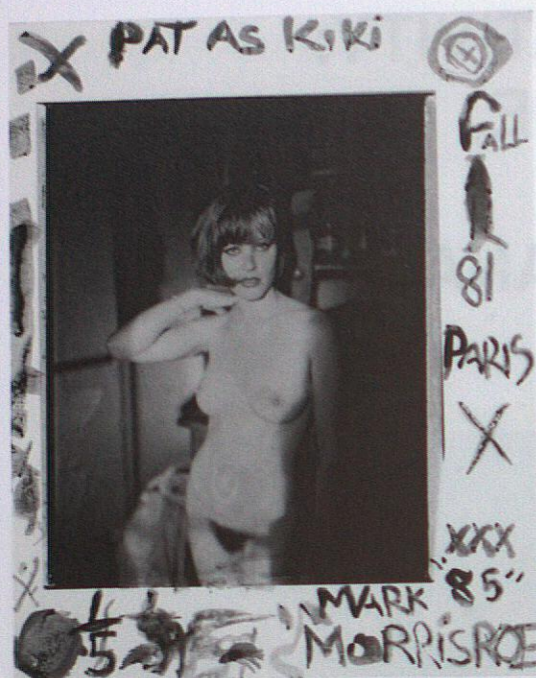
EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK*

DOING THINGS WITH BEING UNDONE

Imagine it is the fall of 1989. The setting is the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. A group of doctoral students assemble near an arrangement of Nicolas Poussin paintings, which came into the collection in 1942: *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist and Saint Elizabeth* (1650) and *The Infant Bacchus Entrusted to the Nymphs of Nysa; The Death of Echo and Narcissus* (1657). Amid life, death, and the promise of an afterlife in art according to the classical canon is a test of taste sparked by the performative imperative: the fire alarm has just gone off; what do you save? The setting of this interrogative command constrains judgment to the parameters of what is hung on the walls. It is a test whose very terms might seem to reinforce, in a condensed and overdetermined fashion, the presumption that art just is, that the



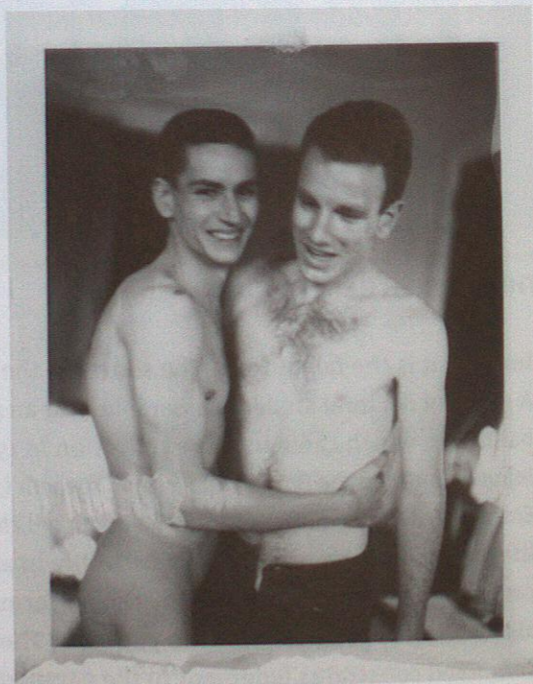
Jimmy De Sana, *Gooseberries*, 1987.
Dye bleach photograph, 15½ x 29¾ inches



Mark Morrisroe, *Pat as Kiki, fall 81 Paris*, 1985. Gelatin silver print from Polaroid negative inscribed with ink, 9⁷/₈ x 7⁵/₁₆ inches



Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled (Pat)*, c. 1981. Polaroid, 2⁷/₈ x 3³/₄ inches



Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Jonathan)*, c. 1979. Polaroid, 4¹/₄ x 3³/₈ inches

condition of being art is not conditional but is a matter of eternal, timeless, and even transcendent value, disengaged from the urgencies of everyday life in times of crisis. Times, that is, like these.

The canonical weight of art historical tradition in the mode of display makes it hard to imagine that seven years earlier, in 1982, Boston School² artist-photographer Mark Morrisroe's first solo show was held not just on the other side of the river, at the 11th Hour Gallery, but also here within the walls of the Fogg.³ The sound of the alarm of the imperative breaks the sensory and sense-making seal of the museum's white-cube vault, and the social and the political intrude to call out the contingency of any demonstration of taste.

Morrisroe had just died, in this season that might be called the summer of hate, from complications of AIDS. The previous month—amid a firestorm of controversy over the denial of federal funding for AIDS prevention and treatment (in effect, over what forms of life are supported as livable)—the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, had announced its decision to cancel a retrospective of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, who had also just died (in March) from AIDS-related complications.⁴ The performative photograph emerged as both the tactical medium and the central target in the pitched battle over the terms of the social contract of support.

It is the fall of 1989: the exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* has just opened at Artists Space in New York. Curated by Boston School photographer Nan Goldin, it positions art as pressed into action in the face of death and outrageous loss, arguing that art is not a passive or remote witnessing but an exposure as intimately difficult as, in the words of David Wojnarowicz, "X-rays from hell."⁵ Art, in the terms of Goldin's essay, is to act out, to serve as "outcry" and "mechanism for survival."⁶ In a posthumous installation dedicated to Morrisroe, which occupies an intimate corner of the exhibition, a small black-and-white Polaroid self-portrait from 1989 (taken from such a close vantage that its viewer is positioned as if in bed with the artist as the latter is dying) is installed between a sandwich print of a face submerged in unsettling liquid (*Ramsey, Lake Oswego*, 1988) and a mixed-media tribute by Morrisroe's lover Ramsey McPhillips. The stained white sheet, shards of glass, and open white book of McPhillips's work cannot be contained by the plexiglass of the arrangement's presentation case, which had been smeared with the words "AM I DEAD YET."⁷ Less question or statement than accusation, the smudged letters push the finger-pointing indexicality of photography across the threshold of intimacy to make active, demanding, and denunciatory the scene of dying. In doing with tears, rage,

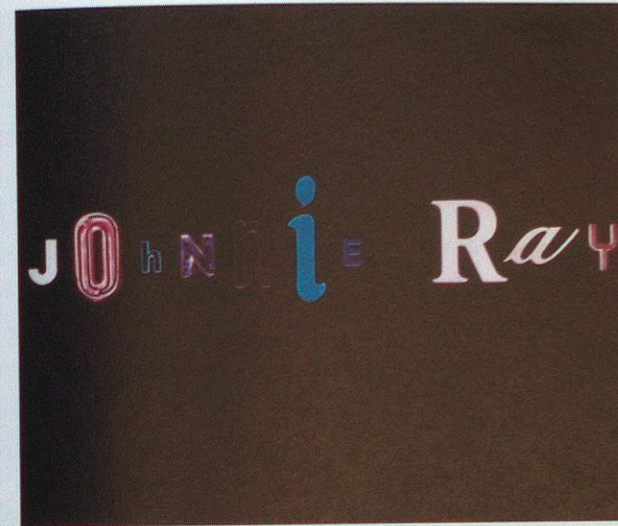
desire, photo chemicals, and dirt things that exceed mere depiction, the Morrisroe installation emphasizes the show's overall commitment to the performative and to the photograph as the exemplary double agent of active exposure.

The performative photograph does not so much represent as promise or threaten to act. Enacted in the field of compelled performance that can radically misfire, art is unstable; it is not a matter of an essential is-ness but a socially and politically consequential mattering of matter, a matter of performativity and contingent dependency (on the I who speaks, the eye that sees)—that is, it is subject to the effects of doing, being done, and being undone. It is at this very moment (in the late 1980s and into the 1990s) that Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are developing these unsettling propositions in a speculative dare that will come to be known as queer theory.

TRUTH OR DARE

Imagine it is 1989, the year that provided the title for a portfolio of eleven prints dedicated to artists "lost to AIDS."⁸ Published to benefit the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, the portfolio constellates three artists—Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, and Jimmy De Sana—who might otherwise seem only tenuously connected.⁹ In her photograph from the portfolio, which is dedicated to Morrisroe, Cindy Sherman poses (in the manner of her well-known Film Stills) in a dark-haired wig and baggy orange sweater, looking vaguely collegiate against the moody gray of a tree-lined street; Jack Pierson's C-print of a collaged ransom note spells out "Johnnie Ray" against a black field, in honor of Jack Smith; and, with its folding camera-body in white tights, Laurie Simmons's *Walking Camera* (also known as *Jimmy the Camera*) echoes De Sana's *Suburban* series of estranged bodies as objects (though quite ill in 1989, De Sana continued to produce work until his death, on July 27, 1990).¹⁰ "Let's make a list of the salient features of our eighties," Wayne Koestenbaum recounts in his essay "My 1980s," before forming, with his boyfriend, the essay's aphoristic bullet points. They came up with just two items: "cocaine, AIDS."¹¹

As their radically differing modes of appearance in the portfolio attest, Morrisroe, Pierson, and De Sana are indelibly marked but not bound by AIDS—not merely because Pierson (who learned he was HIV positive in 1992) is still alive. In 1989 De Sana curated the exhibition *Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, which included Morrisroe's work.¹² Looking at the



Jack Pierson, *Johnnie Ray (in honor of Jack Smith)*, 2000.
C-print, 19⁷/₈ x 23¹³/₁₆ inches



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (for Mark Morrisroe)*, 1980.
C-print, 11¹/₈ x 15³/₈ inches



Laurie Simmons, *Walking Camera (Jimmy the Camera)*,
variation (in honor of Jimmy De Sana), 1987/2000.
C-print, Crystal archive-type chromogenic print,
10 x 5¹³/₁₆ inches

many Morrisroe photographs that feature friend and sometime lover Pierson (then known as Jonathan) might prompt one to imagine them to have formed one of the tightest bonds in the charged elective affinities of the Boston School. Yet while the photogenic—especially the snapshot aesthetic and look of the found photograph—holds a significant place in Pierson's work from the time of his first solo show, at Simon Watson in 1990, material exploration of the medium was central to Morrisroe's and De Sana's practices—especially at the end of their lives, when they embraced darkroom-based experimentation and photograms. Even though Morrisroe lived (and died) in New Jersey, it's tempting to unite the three artists as downtown New York City artists with roots in punk aesthetics and sensibilities (De Sana arrived in 1973, Pierson came for an exchange semester at Cooper Union in 1983 and returned for the long term in the mideighties, and Morrisroe moved from Boston in 1986). De Sana, in particular, actively shaped and chronicled the East Village art scene.

What most substantively binds Morrisroe, Pierson, and De Sana, however, is the support each received from artist-turned-gallerist Pat Hearn. Hearn had moved to New York from Boston in 1983 (after graduating, like Morrisroe, from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts) and within three years of opening her eponymous gallery gave Morrisroe his first New York solo show, in 1986; she also gave him his last before his death, in 1988.¹³ Hearn both represented Morrisroe and paid the rent on his apartment in Jersey City.¹⁴ After his death, Hearn took over his estate and featured his work in solo shows in 1994, 1996, and finally in 1999, the year before she died of cancer. Pierson worked for Pat Hearn Gallery as an art handler about the same time Hearn began showing Morrisroe's and De Sana's work.¹⁵ Hearn first showed Pierson's work in 1991 (in the SoHo gallery) and included him in a group exhibition with Mary Heilmann and Jessica Stockholder in 1992. Hearn represented De Sana from 1987 to his death in 1990 (and then worked with his estate until 1997). Two of De Sana's last exhibitions during his lifetime were solo exhibitions at the Ninth Street gallery, in 1987 and 1988, for which the gallery published chapbooks, *Wrongrong* and *Quotations from Jimmy De Sana*. In 1995, at the Chelsea location, Hearn featured his late work in a posthumous exhibition.

Ultimately, however, what binds Morrisroe, Pierson, and De Sana at Pat Hearn is not a matter of social context or the particular support structures for artistic viability. As relations that hinge on careers shaped by life-threatening illnesses (Pierson received his HIV diagnosis at thirty-two; Morrisroe and De Sana died from complications of AIDS at thirty and forty,



Jimmy De Sana (1950–1990): *A Selected Survey of Photographs, 1970–1990*, exhibition view, Pat Hearn Gallery, 1995

JILL H. CASID



MARK MORRISROE

*Mark Morrisroe, exhibition views,
Pat Hearn Gallery, 1986*

respectively; and Hearn died of cancer at forty-five), the main lines of their ties (economic, affective, and aesthetic) are entangled with the rub of rupture—what is unsustainable and unsustainable, what defies permanence, what dies—to apprehend them means reckoning with the ambivalently creative force of doing things with being undone. What binds the work that Morrisroe, Pierson, and De Sana showed at Pat Hearn Gallery is its exercise of the uneasy power of the deformative at the haunted beginnings of queer theory.

GO AHEAD AND CALL THEM DEFORMATIVES

Imagine that it is 1989: it is the early days of queer theory, during which emerges the powerfully unsettling assertion that what we take as sexed and gendered substance is, rather, style (that the sexual and gendered matter of the body is the semblance of a ground produced by the stylized repetition of acts compelled by social sanction and taboo) and that this very performative character also holds the potential for subversion. Judith Butler develops this argument in the manuscript of *Gender Trouble* (submitted to Routledge in 1989 for publication in 1990), which becomes one of the key texts to unleash the queer power of performativity and its other side.¹⁶

The concept of the performative was first introduced by British philosopher J. L. Austin in his 1955 Harvard lectures, published as *How to Do Things with Words*. Demonstrating the socially binding power of the performative, in which “accuracy and morality alike are [to be] on the side of the plain saying that our word is our bond,” Austin offered a how-to for saying as doing, spooling out the “I do,” the “I promise,” the “I challenge,” and the “I dare” across a minefield riddled by misplays, miscarriages, misinvolutions, misapplications, misexecutions, nonexecutions, disrespects, dissimulations, nonfulfillments, disloyalties, infractions, indisciplines, and breaches.¹⁷ While attempting to group the many ways in which the performative might go astray into a kind of special class euphemized as the “infelicities,” Austin opened up the performative as lined and mined by the “I don’t” inevitably lurking within the “I do.” The performative holds within it not merely the negative, undoing power of regulatory and restrictive—even deadly—norms, which render some ways of existence viable and others unlivable, but also the potential of doing otherwise. To fail to properly reproduce the norm is not *not* doing. In the face of those lethal negations, the performative enables doing something with the ways in which

one is being undone. We might call this negative other side of the performative the *deformative*.

The deformative was never quite taken up in the institutionalized version of queer theory, though it appears in important ways in two foundational essays published in the inaugural issue of the journal *GLQ*: Butler’s “Critically Queer” and Sedgwick’s “Queer Performativity.”¹⁸ In “Critically Queer,” the deformative characterizes the way that the shaming and taunting designed to *break* can also *make*. In asking how the *queer* in queer theory can bind through the sharing of isolating and unbearable shame, Butler goes on to interrogate how the performative address of “queer” works alongside the “I pronounce you” to deform the site of the compulsory and its sanction and thereby open it to unpredictability. In Sedgwick’s “Queer Performativity,” the deformative appears as a there-but-not-there parenthetical move, as an anticipation of dismissal, injury, or shaming, but also as a shout-out or call to critics and potential fellow travelers in the creative pleasures of shame. The perverse creativity of the deformative dislodges the central position of the “I do” of the marriage ceremony in positioning not just the eccentric but also the excluded and ostensibly damaged in the privileged role of the exemplary. Sedgwick famously returns the constitutive shaming, around which those on the stigmatized margins are formed, with the heat-lamp blaze of “shame on you.” But shame may never fully dissipate; repair is only temporary, for there is no permanence. Not only does shame turn out to be an abundant and renewable resource, but the deformative, for Butler, is also the vulnerability of the lag or gap and the space between us. “To what extent,” Butler asks, “has the performative ‘queer’ operated alongside, as a deformation of, the ‘I pronounce you . . .’ of the marriage ceremony?”¹⁹ Operating alongside and mining the performative from within, the deformative exercises the power of an alternative bond, the bond of the dare to risk and lose. Even when and as they fail, the performative in the utterances of language and image does not merely describe a world but also negotiates its binding terms in ways that can render that world otherwise. Go ahead then and call the exercise of this queer power “deformativity.”

In a founding move for what has become known as crip theory, Robert McRuer goes back to a discarded classic, the 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” by lesbian-feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich, which posited the now-derided notion of the “lesbian continuum.”²⁰ In a severe performance of “working the weakness,” crip theory’s charged naming (the term is derived from *cripple*) takes on the discomfiting risks of thinking and feeling from the place where stigmatic

terms of injury take hold in the material. McRuer insists on thinking the formation of the subject along the twisted razor wire of interwoven compulsions—a compelled heterosexuality that enforces a normatively defined bodily and mental comportment and fitness, which he calls “compulsory able-bodiedness.” To grapple with this condition—which determines both the terms of belonging and the horizon of freedoms—entails acknowledging the power of discourse and what I term *compulsory visualization*, a power that works both negatively and positively and is perhaps most obvious in the evaluative terms of the photogenic.

As an assessment of fitness, the photogenic points to the terms that condition the subject’s appearance (from the passport to the driver’s license) under the harsh comparative glare of photographically shaped judgment, in the cutting terms of an ability to conform to an already-photographed standard. The photogenic bears the present weight of the indirectly seen but nonetheless palpably felt pressure of the photographic archive of sexed, gendered, and racialized types. The photogenic also designates that system of compulsory visualization that produces the subject within and against a regulatory and fantasy-engendering archive of normative and deviant bodies. It carries with it that archive, which shapes not just how one sees oneself and how one is seen but also the subject’s very grasp on personhood, citizenship, and a livable life. In rendering the subject as an image (a visible surface to be read and judged) that is measured against an image classification, compulsory visualization is photogenic in another sense. As a generator of the subject as image, compulsory visualization produces that which it may seem merely to represent. The field of compulsory visualization is, however, also a terrain in which the deformative powers of the photogenic at the compounded site of injury, loss, and surveilling exposure opens up the possibility of doing things with the negative. In refusing the demand to “clean up” and convert the negative into a positive, the deformative powers of the photogenic may generate otherwise, even if sometimes on a lag or in the time of the untimely.

PLACING SOME DIFFERENT KINDS OF UTTERANCES IN THE POSITION OF THE EXEMPLARY

Take Morrisroe’s pledge (from his journal entry of July 13, 1985) that emblazons the cover of the 1999 monograph: “I Mark Morrisroe swear to coldly use and manipulate every one who can help my career. No matter how much

I hate them I will pretend that I love them. I will fuck anyone who can help me no matter how aesthetically unappealing they are to me.”²¹ In an essay written in advance of his book-length Morrisroe biography, *Am I Dead Yet?*, the artist’s lover Ramsey McPhillips recites this oath as the basis from which to cast Morrisroe’s art practice with the impress of his lived experience of compounded disability (as a cripple who walked with a limp and carried a bullet in his chest and who eventually sustained the impairments of an HIV-positive diagnosis) in terms of theatrical performance: “Mark’s dramatized life was exacerbated by his HIV. Death was his biggest leading role and his home an appropriate stage for his last performance.”²²

This appeal to performance gets most interesting where the dark rooms of home and hospital and the constricted passageways between toilet, shower, and bed are rigged to meet the exposing X-ray demands of the photogenic that cannot cure but nonetheless demands to be shown. Artist and friend Rafael Sánchez describes Morrisroe’s practice of setting up a makeshift darkroom wherever he was and argues that the pictures look the way they do because “they are rubbed up against his life.”²³ Out of these makeshift-darkroom experiments, particularly the colored photograms made from Morrisroe’s own X-rays, Norman Bryson excavates the “preemptive use of pain,” claiming that they mime death’s corrosive reduction of the body to teeth, hair, and bones, yet promise to work a kind of talismanic magic, dealing a DIY hit to poach the final blow.²⁴ Hearn situates these last works as the tail end of a story, of the “injection of narrative content,” that menaces the “pure seductive quality of the pictorial image” as Morrisroe moves from “figurative narrative” to isolated images in a field (a bird in the sky, the detail of a chest):

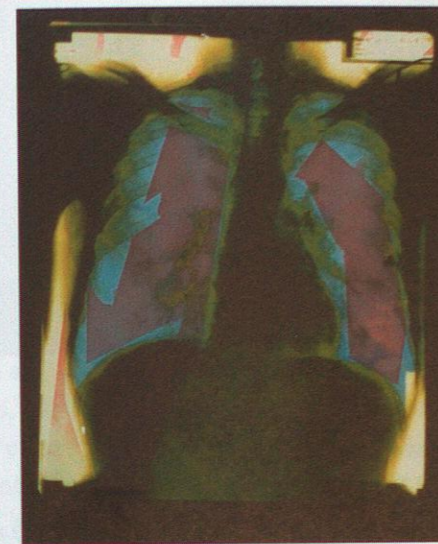
Frequent trips to emergency rooms often resulted in doctors storming through doors, chest x-ray in hand, both exclaiming and inquiring, “Do you know that you have a bullet in your chest?!” Naturally, Mark’s reply was always, “No.” The bullet rested between Mark’s infected lung and his heart. During his extended visits to the hospital, which progressively became longer and longer, Mark set up a dark room in the shower, using his own body x-rays as subject matter. These final works bring the narrative to an end.²⁵

In Morrisroe’s last solo show before his death, at Pat Hearn Gallery in 1988, the X-ray photographs and photograms are installed along with material indexes of his injuries: a bronze cast of the unevenly worn heels of his shoes and a projectile echo of that bullet lodged in his chest. Teresa Gruber

characterizes the arrangement as that of a “memorial site,” while Lawrence Chua, in a review for *Flash Art*, calls it a “clinical shrine: a monument to the corporal presence of the artist in contemporary society.”²⁶ Yet the propulsive Day-Glo of the three X-ray photographs of Morrisroe’s chest cavity—the rib cage in hot pink, acid yellow, and phosphorescent green against a black ground—does not allow the work to resolve on the gallery wall. Rather than the formal closure of an advance tomb, monument, memorial, or clinical seal, the seductive coloration and repulsive rub of the chemical residue of these darkroom experiments solicit a kind of pact different from that of representation’s structure of reference. In the unsettled and unsettling space-time of being *with* the obscene of death, they issue the kind of deformative oath it takes to live our dying.

Take Jack Pierson’s 1991 installation in the unfinished third-floor space at Pat Hearn’s Wooster Street gallery. Furniture runs along two facing walls; a corner of the room holds a wooden platform with a Mylar curtain and holiday lights. Liz Kotz describes the arrangement as “assembled almost as arenas for performance” that issue an invitation to enter.²⁷ An early sign piece, lettered on the wall like a ransom note with mismatched typefaces, sizes, and colors, extends permission in the form of extortion: “YOU ARE ALLOWED 2 TOUCH THINGS.” The push-pull of the sign’s prompt might seem to direct attention from the wall to the collection of touchable things (a pack of cigarettes, a turntable, an open book, flip-flops, a white T-shirt stretched over the back of a chair). The postcard size and snapshot aesthetic of the two small photographs hung on the wall and the one propped on the wall’s ledge might position the images as hardly worth a mention. Yet these slight, almost-not photographs and their look of the provisional—as if they were processed through the grain of memory or the frictional rub of fantasy—call attention to the radical contingency of the affordances provided by a stud wall and its support beams.

When reprising the installation in 2017 for the Aspen Art Museum’s exhibition *Jack Pierson: 5 Shows from the '90s*, Pierson would call in its effect with the title *Diamond Life*, a “smooth-operator” echo of Sade.²⁸ Poet Eileen Myles would characterize the installation as “little lyrical rooms to die in.”²⁹ In a 2017 conversation with Myles for *Interview*, Pierson would rearticulate the genesis of the installation in terms of “a performative photographic sensibility.” While not dispelling the sense of the theatrical conveyed by the look of the stage set, Pierson would go on to speak of his “intention at the time to go back and take pictures that I should have taken better in that room, on these sets.”³⁰ Mining the double and enfolded sense of *camera* as



Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled*, c. 1988.
Colorized gelatin silver print,
photogram of X-ray, 19⁷/₈ x 15⁷/₈ inches



Mark Morrisroe, *Untitled*, 1988.
Colorized gelatin silver print,
photogram of X-ray, 17 x 14 inches

Mark Morrisroe, exhibition view,
Pat Hearn Gallery, 1988



Jack Pierson, *Diamond Life*, 1990.
Mixed media, 96 x 60 x 48 inches.
Installation view, Pat Hearn Gallery, 1991



Jack Pierson, *56 WASHINGTON AVENUE*, 1991.
Mixed media, 96 x 48 x 48 inches.
Installation view, Pat Hearn Gallery, 1991

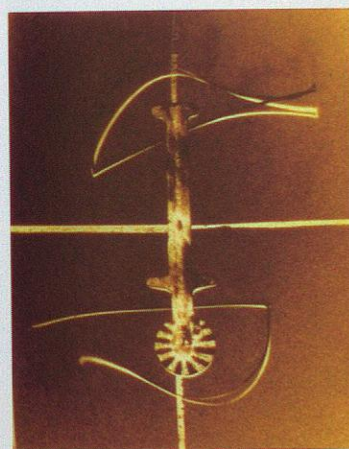
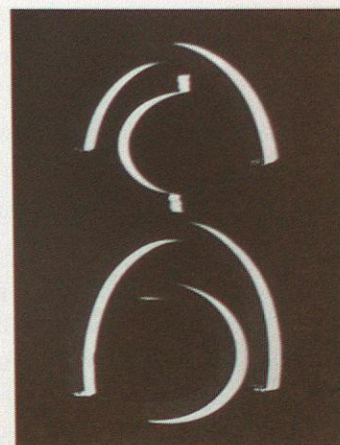
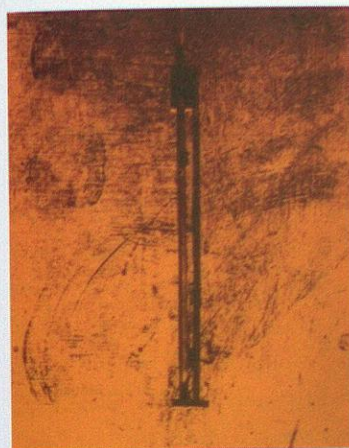
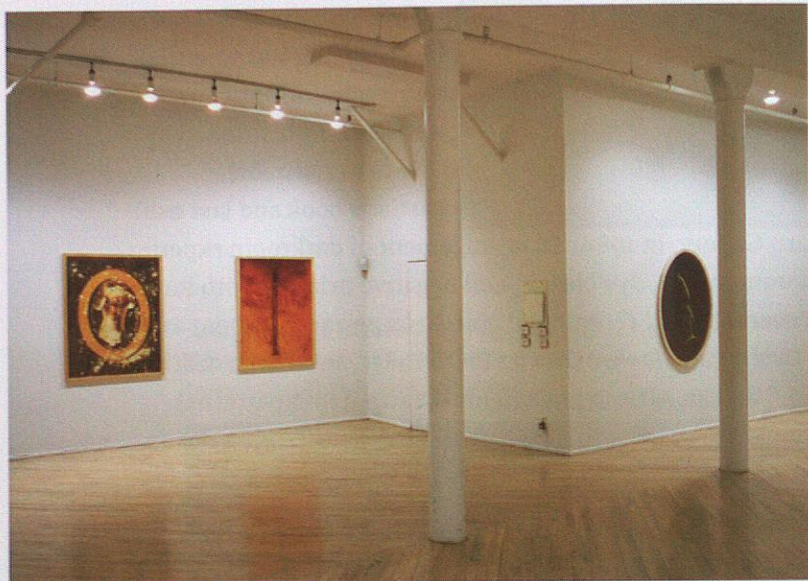


the term for both “room” and “photographic apparatus,” the installation affords rooms for imaging life and death otherwise, for propping up life by affording a dream place, however shabby, for living one’s dying. The not-quite photographs developing on the walls of the not-quite rooms negotiate the exposures and demands of the photogenic by producing the potentially habitable out of the deformative exercise of a counterphotogenic capacity that may be a matter of style, and yet a styling not so easily dismissed by the parsing of the actual into the as-if real and the materializable.

Take *Quotations from Jimmy De Sana*, the artist’s book and last exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery, in 1988. An arrangement of darkroom experiments, using photomontage, dye bleach, and negative printing with lurid color, estranges everyday and ceremonial objects (tape and wire bent and rent into *Broken Oval #1* and *Broken Oval #2* (both 1987), an African death mask, a “sun god,” and an African stick figure arranged into patterns). The split, reversed, cutup, and hybridized figures (fruits and flowers—an amaryllis, a carnation, a rose, and a pear—with muscled legs) float in suspension on unspecified, often black, grounds. Their relatively large print formats (most are 50 by 40 inches, with the smallest 20 by 24 inches) refuse human scale. These devices position the viewer as an object among objects in not the abyss but the immanence of an object world that poses the questions of being—of subjection to mortal temporality—and the not-unthinkable of death amid the photogenic’s stilled quality of deathlessness.

Under the estate direction of his friend the artist Laurie Simmons, De Sana’s papers, slides, prints, and negatives were donated to the Fales Library at New York University. In 2015, Aperture Foundation and the gallery Salon 94, in New York, published *Jimmy DeSana: Suburban*, a selection of De Sana’s earlier work, the signature vividly illuminated, body-object investigations, alongside essays by Simmons and curator Elisabeth Sussman, who cast De Sana as an “erotic miniaturist” and a kind of living camera who produces “still lifes with humans.”³¹ Prints of De Sana’s smaller-format late work (of 1985–86) appeared in 2016 in the exhibition *Remainders*, curated by David Everitt Howe at Pioneer Works, in Brooklyn, and a show of thirty “lost prints”—Cibachromes from 1985—resurfaced at the Steven Kasher Gallery, in New York, in 2017. The *Suburban* series has circulated widely (in such exhibitions as *Still Lives: Jimmy De Sana and Hanna Liden* at Salon 94 in 2016). The late work’s ostensible turn away from the body and sexuality to abstraction; away from joy, playfulness, and humor to melancholy and moodiness; and away from life to death are shorthanded in critic Martha Schwendener’s rhetorical question-as-answer: “How do you represent things like AIDS, sexuality, and death—or is this even an artist’s job?”³²

Jimmy De Sana, exhibition views,
Pat Hearn Gallery, 1988

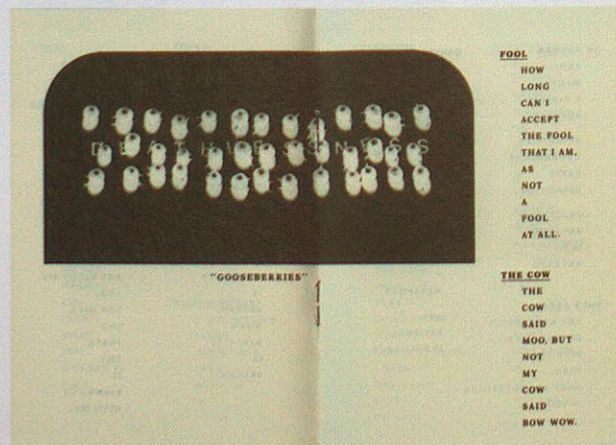
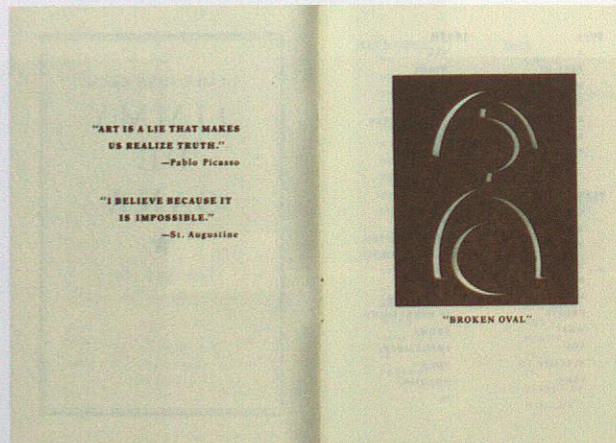
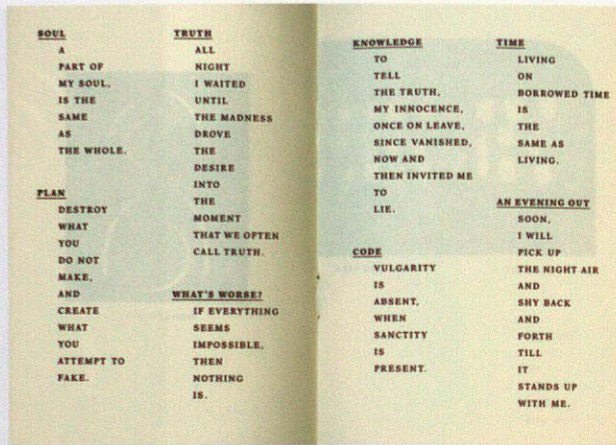
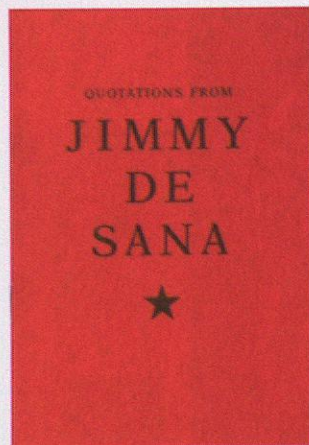


Jimmy De Sana, *African Stick Figure*, 1987.
Dye bleach photograph, 50 x 40 inches

Jimmy De Sana, *Broken Oval #2*, 1987.
Dye bleach photograph, 50 x 40 inches

Jimmy De Sana, *Sun God*, 1987.
Dye bleach photograph, 50 x 40 inches

Jimmy De Sana, from *Chair Diptych*, 1968/1987.
Dye bleach photograph, 50 x 40 inches

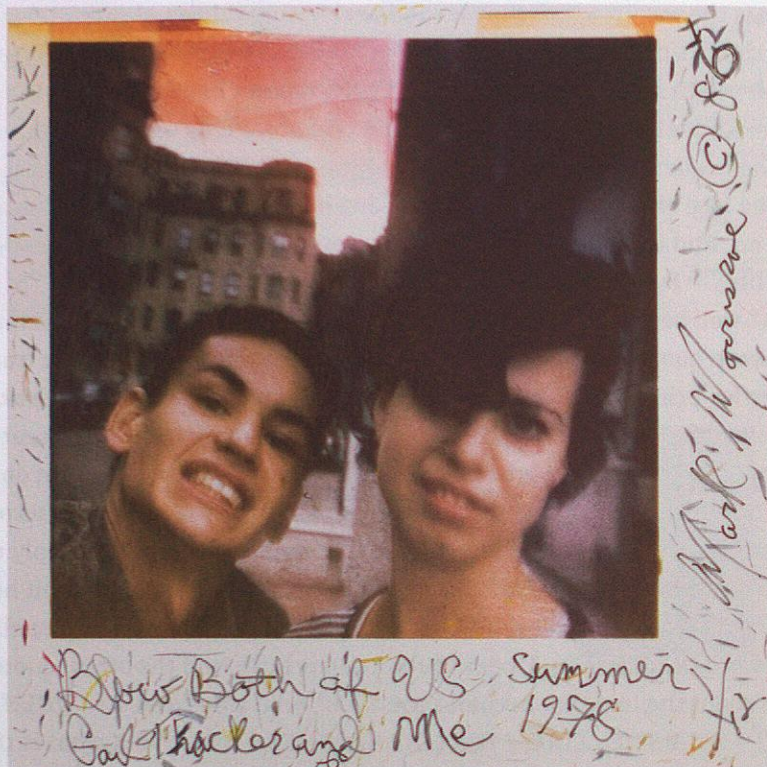


Cover and interior spreads from *Quotations from Jimmy De Sana*,
New York, Pat Hearn Gallery, 1988

Whatever might be said about the mood, temperature, and affective pulse of the work from 1987 featured in Pat Hearn Gallery's 1988 show, what is most provocative and difficult about De Sana's experiment in objectification is the way in which it poses the perforating riddles of mortal existence to riddle us in the doubled sense. The exhibition's small, charged artist's book—with its simple red cover and title, typeset in all capitals and a single star—condenses this deformative exercise of riddling as the posing of unresolvable questions that pierce.³³ Speaking of a lack of control, particularly in the face of "medical things," De Sana issued a repeated no: "I can always say no. And I do like to say no. And I've applied that now to every aspect of my life."³⁴ But the book's deformative riddling extends the "nots" of this "no" well beyond De Sana and his proprietary claim of "my life." Bracketed between quotations from Picasso and St. Augustine and set across from the negative print *Broken Oval* and the precept from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—"Die at the right time!"—and juxtaposed with the negative print *Chair* (1968/1987) are short-form, aphoristic poems that turn on a logic of inversion, or negation. These pivot around the book's centerpiece stretched across its spine: the long, horizontal negative print simply titled *Gooseberries* (1987). Arrayed like luminous typewriter keys, the fruit hovers over a dark ground on which barely discernible capital letters spell out the word *Deathlessness*. Under the word *Desire*, we find the often-quoted line about the line that becomes the "you" who steps over it: "WHEN YOU / STEP / OVER THE / LINE, / THE LINE BECOMES / YOU."³⁵ But what is this line that is crossed? The we who have suffered violences and indignities directly might find here what writer and artist Travis Jeppesen calls the "fluffy comfort in becoming-object." This is the power-knowledge of the "corporeal-ist," which suggests that De Sana's work be taken as a kind of blueprint, a gesture against not-mattering, the self-exercise of a "violence against disappearing."³⁶ At the same time, the line crossed that becomes us also deforms in the crossed lines of the cracking X over *Chair*, riddling us with the spectral promises of deathlessness and the "good death" as a dying at the right time, to make an art not of reference but in the performative compact of dying, in which we don't get to displace the burden.

BLOW BOTH OF US

Take Morrisroe's double headshot of himself and his friend the artist Gail Thacker in the street. In the thick white margins of this Polaroid (taken in



Mark Morrisroe, *Blow Both of Us, Gail Thacker and Me, Summer 1978, 1986*. C-print from black-and-white and color negatives, retouched with ink and inscribed with marker, 16 x 16 inches

1978, and, in 1986, reprinted and given the hand treatment that became his signature) the scrawled imperative “Blow Both of Us” makes explicit the other side of the field of the face where the ID orders of compulsory visualization meet the implicit but often denied sexual economy of the command to appear. What does authority want? And what happens when, in teasing the terms of the nonconsensual photographic contract, that authority is shown to be both polymorphously desiring and wanting?

The answer is still out, for the call is not over.³⁷ The photograph’s taunt doesn’t only give the title proposition to Pat Hearn’s first exhibition, a 1982 show held in her loft in Boston, which included the work of Morrisroe and Thacker.³⁸ It also lends the title conceit to the 2007 Participant Inc show (curated by artists Shannon Ebner and Adam Putnam) that looked to that earlier exhibition (and to Hearn’s intimacy with and support of Morrisroe and De Sana) to map the photograph, through examples of, among others, the work of Morrisroe and De Sana, across two generations of artists as an “object of longing” and even a technology for a kind of realization along friendship networks of sparked intimacies and haunted exchanges.³⁹ Placing *Blow Both of Us* in the position of the exemplary (as it enwraps the Morrisroe photograph, Hearn’s first exhibition, the later endeavor, and what it entails to look back, reflect on, and take stock of her legacy) magnetizes that double sense of the exemplary as at once desirable model and cautionary deterrent in ways that call out not to be resolved. One of the truths of this tough story of tenacious brilliance, hinged to irredeemable loss, is the call of Pat Hearn’s support for a practice of photography that refuses the developmental register of the positive-negative finality of truth or lies, which denies the shaping power of the latent and of what moves beyond the bounds of representation, and instead presses the counterphotogenic work of the negative out into the uncertainties of the deformative exercise of something more like the hustle and the bid of the ongoing dare to imagine and materialize an otherwise in the midst of being undone.

NOTES

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 3.
- 2 The Boston School was not yet known as the Boston School: Lia Gangitano would not curate the landmark Boston School show at the Institute of Contemporary Art until 1995. See Lia Gangitano, introduction to *Boston School*, ed. Lia Gangitano (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995), 12.
- 3 The exhibition is listed under solo shows on Morrisroe's curriculum vitae, along with *Yes, Pussy Good* at 11th Hour Gallery, Boston. Colin de Land, American Fine Arts, Co., and Pat Hearn Gallery Archives, MSS.008, Series II.A, Box 101, Folder 1968, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.
- 4 Arts funding was concurrently defunded. See Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America* 77, no. 9 (September 1989): 39–43.
- 5 David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (New York: Artists Space, 1989), 6–11.
- 6 Nan Goldin, "In the Valley of the Shadow," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, 4–5. See also Sophie Junge, *Art about AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2016).
- 7 For a full checklist of Morrisroe's works in the exhibition and information on Ramsey McPhillips's display box, see Junge, *Art about AIDS*, 26.
- 8 1989: *Portfolio Honoring Artists Lost to AIDS and Benefitting the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS*, curated by Ilene Kurtz, David Kiehl, and Patrick Moore (New York: Estate Project for Artists with AIDS and the Alliance for the Arts, 1989). The portfolio includes prints by Chuck Close, Nan Goldin, Jim Hodges, Frank Moore, Jorge Pardo, Jack Pierson, Lari Pittman, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Kiki Smith, and Robert Wilson, in honor of (respectively) Peter Hujar, Cookie Mueller, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Joe Brainard, Scott Burton, Jack Smith, Liberace, Mark Morrisroe, Jimmy De Sana, David Wojnarowicz, and Paul Thek.
- 9 Morrisroe, Pierson, and De Sana are not linked by their training or formation: Morrisroe (born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1959) went on to earn a one-year master's degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts; Pierson (born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1960) received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art; and De Sana (born in Detroit in 1950) went to art school in Atlanta.
- 10 The 1989 portfolio was acquired in 2003 for the permanent collection of the Harvard Art Museums with the Richard and Ronay Menschel Fund for the Acquisition of Photographs.
- 11 Wayne Koestenbaum, "My 1980s," in *My 1980s and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 3–14.
- 12 *Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, curated by Jimmy De Sana, with essays by Andy Grundberg and Jerry Saltz, organized and with an introduction by Steven High and William Salzillo (Richmond, VA: Anderson Gallery; Clinton, NY: Emerson Gallery, 1989).
- 13 On Hearn's own work in video and performance, her formative experimentation with technological transmission, and the understanding of Hearn's gallery career as continuous, through the performative roles of collaborator, producer, and facilitator, see Isla [Mason] Leaver-Yap, "Passing Time: Pat Hearn, 1980–81," in *Dealing With: Some Texts, Images, and Thoughts Related to American Fine Arts, Co.* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 75–80.
- 14 Teresa Philo Gruber, *There Was a Sense of Family: The Friends of Mark Morrisroe* (Nürnberg, Germany: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2012), 43.
- 15 *Ibid.* See also Liz Kotz, "Golden Years," in *Jack Pierson: Desire/Despair, A Retrospective, Selected Works 1985–2005*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 19.
- 16 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520. See also Butler, preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), vii–xxvi.
- 17 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (1962; repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 10.
- 18 Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 17–32; Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 1–16.
- 19 Butler, "Critically Queer," 18.
- 20 Robert McRuer, "Introduction: Compulsory Able-bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–32.
- 21 *Mark Morrisroe* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1999). The book includes an essay by Klaus Ottman and was published the same year as the exhibition *Mark Morrisroe, 1959–1989: Black & White Photographs, Hand-Painted Photograms, and Rayographs from the Eighties*, at the Pat Hearn Gallery.
- 22 Ramsey McPhillips, "Who Turned Out the Limelight?: The Tragi-Comedy of Mark Morrisroe," in *Loss within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*, ed. Edmund White (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 108.
- 23 Rafael Sánchez, March 2009, New York, quoted in Gruber, *There Was a Sense of Family*, 103.
- 24 Norman Bryson, "Boston School," in *Boston School*, 33.
- 25 Pat Hearn, "Mark Morrisroe (1959–1989): A Survey from the Estate," in Gangitano, 59–60.
- 26 Teresa Gruber, "Solo Exhibitions," in *Mark Morrisroe*, ed. Beatrix Ruf and Thomas Seelig (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010), 470; and Lawrence Chua, "Mark Morrisroe: Pat Hearn," *Flash Art*, no. 142 (October 1988): 132.
- 27 Kotz, "Golden Years," 18–19.
- 28 *Diamond Life* was the title of the English band Sade and lead vocalist Sade Adu's 1984 debut album. Stephen Holden, "The Pop Life: 'Diamond Life,' Sade's Debut Album," *New York Times*, January 30, 1985.
- 29 Eileen Myles, "Jack," in *Boston School*, 147.
- 30 Eileen Myles, "Jack Pierson," *Interview*, February 6, 2017.
- 31 Elisabeth Sussman, "Jimmy DeSana: Erotic Miniaturist," in *Jimmy DeSana: Suburban* (New York: Aperture and Salon 94, 2016), 87–90; and Laurie Simmons, "Shoes on My Hands, Purse on My Head," in *Jimmy DeSana: Suburban*, 93–94. De Sana's name appears as DeSana in the work published after his death under the direction of Simmons. For this essay, I have followed the spacing convention of the Pat Hearn Gallery materials.
- 32 Martha Schwendener, "Revisiting an Artist's Provocative Photographs," *New York Times*, August 25, 2016. On the turn to abstraction, see also "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities: David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons," in *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, ed. Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 38–55.
- 33 *Quotations from Jimmy De Sana* (New York: Pat Hearn Gallery, 1988).
- 34 Jimmy De Sana, "Jimmy DeSana: Interviewed by Laurie Simmons," in *Jimmy DeSana* (New York: ART Press, 1990), 38.
- 35 See, for example, William J. Simmons, "Jimmy De Sana: Party Picks, Salon 94, Bowery," June 2013, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/wjsimmons/files/essay_for_salon_94_jds_june_2013_wjs_edits_18_june.pdf.
- 36 Travis Jeppesen, "Forever Okay: The Art of Jimmy De Sana," April 14, 2013, <http://disorientations.com/2013/04/14/forever-okay-the-art-of-jimmy-desana>.
- 37 I am reminded of Michael Jay McClure's reading of the materializing volatility of the "unphotographed" aspects of the work of the Boston School in relation to the photographic work of Robert Giard as a bid to treat the ostensibly historical of photographs "as if each image was ionic—meaning it could combine, electrically, with another." Michael Jay McClure, "Prima Facie: The Photographed, the Unphotographed, and the Boston School," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, no. 15 (2014): 120.
- 38 Leah Triplett Harrington, "9 pm to 5 am: Underground Boston and Mark Morrisroe," *Big Red & Shiny*, November 12, 2012, <http://bigredandshiny.org/15523/9pm-to-5am-underground-boston-and-mark-morrisroe>.
- 39 See the press release for *Blow Both of Us*, curated by Shannon Ebner and Adam Putnam, at Participant Inc, New York, 2007. In addition to Mark Morrisroe, Gail Thacker, and Jimmy De Sana, the exhibition included Eve Fowler, Allen Frame, Alice O'Malley, Luther Price, Michael Queenland, Emily Roysdon, and Dean Sameshima.