



JOAN LOGUE

Call the work still photography sped up, or video halted frame by frame, Logue's camera defines portraiture.

Videosyncrasies

By Ben Lifson

JOAN LOGUE: VIDEO PORTRAITS. The Kitchen, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615. Through March 28.

PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL. Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, Telephone 483-0011. Through April 5.

NEW WAVE ART. P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 46-01 21st Street, Long Island City, 784-2084, through April 5.

Artforum tells us the human figure has returned to art. Current photography exhibits tell us the human face has returned as well. And as the portrait comes back, photographers specialize in social types. Robert Mapplethorpe is now our guide to the fashionable demimonde; Nicholas Nixon to the anonymous poor; Mary Estlin to the anonymous rich; Judy Dater to the intimate companion. This practice confuses the portrait with the portrayed: nothing about the scores of pictures of Deborah Harry or William Burroughs at P.S. 1's punk photo festival, for example, justifies calling them portraits rather than still lifes or catalogue illustrations. At P.S. 1 the photographers are drawn to their subjects because of what, not who, they are; they photograph (rather than paint or draw) because the media consume *photographic* pictures most. And, coterie art aside, many photographers-portraitists (Sheila Metzner, Larry Clark, Nixon until recently) seem to have chosen their idiom first, independently of the problem.

Consider, then, Joan Logue's video portraits, an eight-year-long project of 400 pieces still in progress. The small sampling currently at the Kitchen gives us the famous (Jasper Johns), the anonymous poor (two Italian women behind a bakery counter), and Logue's private world (a portrait of herself and her mother). The range suggests that people, rather than categories, interest this artist, and that she takes portraiture seriously.

She puts the creation of character uppermost. Photographing her bakery ladies during working hours, Logue shows them alternately posing stiffly for her camera

and gaily handing bread and taking money over the counter, relieved to deal with their customers rather than Logue's impassive lens. Character here becomes a complex mixture of public selves. As Logue and her mother cry, wipe each other's tear-streaked cheeks, giggle, embrace, pull away, and hold each other once more, a long fiction develops concerning both the dissolving of old psychological barriers and a temporary surrendering of character to situation—including the artificial situation of posing for a portrait. As tape-loops end and the portraits begin again, repeating their characters through time, "naturalism" is shattered, and artifice reasserted, underscoring the characters' self-consciousness, their knowledge of being stared at. We, in turn, conclude from this repetition that these tapes are highly edited. Artifice becomes part of the major theme.

Real time or edited time, Logue's is primarily *arbitrary*, as arbitrary as the still photographer's shutter speed, and as ineluctable. I write about these portraits, in fact, because of their close connection to still photography. There is the illusion of stripped-down video seeing, of video's literalism, just as still photography is the illusion of stripped-down camera seeing. Logue seems just to point her cameras at her subjects, tell them to look into the lens, turn on the tape recorder, and let reality take over. ("Push the button" read the 1890 Kodak ads, "and we'll do the rest.")

Rigorous control creates this illusion: flat descriptive light; just enough sound to create ambience; no zooms or pans (the video artist's version of handwork); and a plain economical style of framing which seems dedicated to disclosing information rather than creating form. Like any good photographer, Logue knows that the portrait's illusion of character is built on physical information. Seen in extreme closeup and tightly framed, Jasper Johns is a conglomeration of small events in the muscles of his face as he blinks, almost smiles, closes his eyes for long seconds, sniffs, etc., while he sustains an overall

passivity. In this minimalist scenario, a giggle is a climax, a yawn a denouement. Logue's camera has to be that close, her framing that tight, lest the drama be lost.

But as Johns's freckles and flaws become flecks of color in a subtly colored field and, as Logue's lens and flat lighting flatten out Johns's face, we understand Logue's framing to be not only descriptive but allusive. Here she refers to the flatness and chromatic subtlety of Johns's canvases, as well as to Diane Arbus's late close-up portraits. In the other two portraits on view, the references are mainly to still photography. The Italian women fit into their frame as if they were figures in a late Paul Strand portrait; Logue and her mother as if they were figures in a family snapshot on an executive's desk. The installation itself refers to pictures at an exhibition. The television monitors are set into the wall, their chassis concealed, their screens flush with the wall's plain white surface.

All this allusion insists we consider these portraits as *pictures*, in the same way that paintings—and especially photographs—are pictures; that is, *not* as documents, raw data, or the subjects themselves. The difference is that these pictures move. Yet they are not minimovies; still less are they *tours-de-force* in electronically regenerated and transformed imagery. Logue trusts in the inherent drama of the portrait: you are here to be stared at; I and my audience are here to stare at you.

Thus Logue thrives on a theory of video which is close to Andre Bazin's observation about photography: "All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence." And this is a condition, moreover, which still makes many photographers and much of photography's audience intensely uncomfortable.

Consider, for example, the curators and directors of the Whitney Museum of American Art. For the first time in the history of their biennials they have attempted an overview of current photography—20 photographers, more than three rooms full of pictures. But with few exceptions the photographers they have thus honored are those who retreat from an art based in part on how a machine describes the world. Instead, handwork is all important, and painting is the reference point.

Some of these photographers paint or draw on their prints; others spray-paint the world before they photograph. Some construct blatantly artificial sets and photograph intentionally stazy situations; others make sure we see the backdrop paper and lighting stands traditional photographers try to conceal. Anything to let us know someone took the picture. As if we believed otherwise; as if the photographer's hand rather than the photographer's eye determined style. But what results is merely illustration, visual renditions of studio activity, rather than visual meanings wrested from the photographer's confrontation with his materials and the world.

The staff at the Whitney can't see this, I think, in part because the pictures are also big and in color and thus refer to painting. Painting also distracts the Whitney from the mechanistic modernism of color photographers like Joel Meyerowitz, Arthur Ollman, and Richard Misrach, whose work boils down to the effect of strangely colored light on color film. The idea that reality might resemble itself and photographs be photographic apparently disconcerts the Whitney's staff. Ironically, however, the work they selected to oppose this notion is more dependent on the world, more mimetic, than the traditional photography it pretends to displace. Only here the imitated world lies within the edges of contemporary painting.

The Whitney's pseudo-sophistication is a mirror image of the *faux-naif* punk photography across the river at P.S. 1. With its preference for blinding flash, rough framing, crude tonalities, and snapshot awkwardness the P.S. 1 photographers seem at first involved in a purely photographic aesthetic, a pure interest in subject matter. But they are as arty as the Whitney's crowd. Both exhibitions celebrate the uncritical adoption of group aesthetics: at the Whitney, the equation of signature style with personal vision; at P.S. 1 the fallacy that the only step to finding your style is losing all sense of style—except the style of fashion photography. Most disheartening, perhaps, is the observation that neither group has any sense of subject matter. To the Whitney's photographers with their academic modernism, art must be autonomous, subject the occasion for style. Whatever will make their photographs look like their notion of art will do. The P.S. 1 photographers' abdication is more complete: they let Andy Warhol's *Interview* and new wave Top 40 define the world. ■