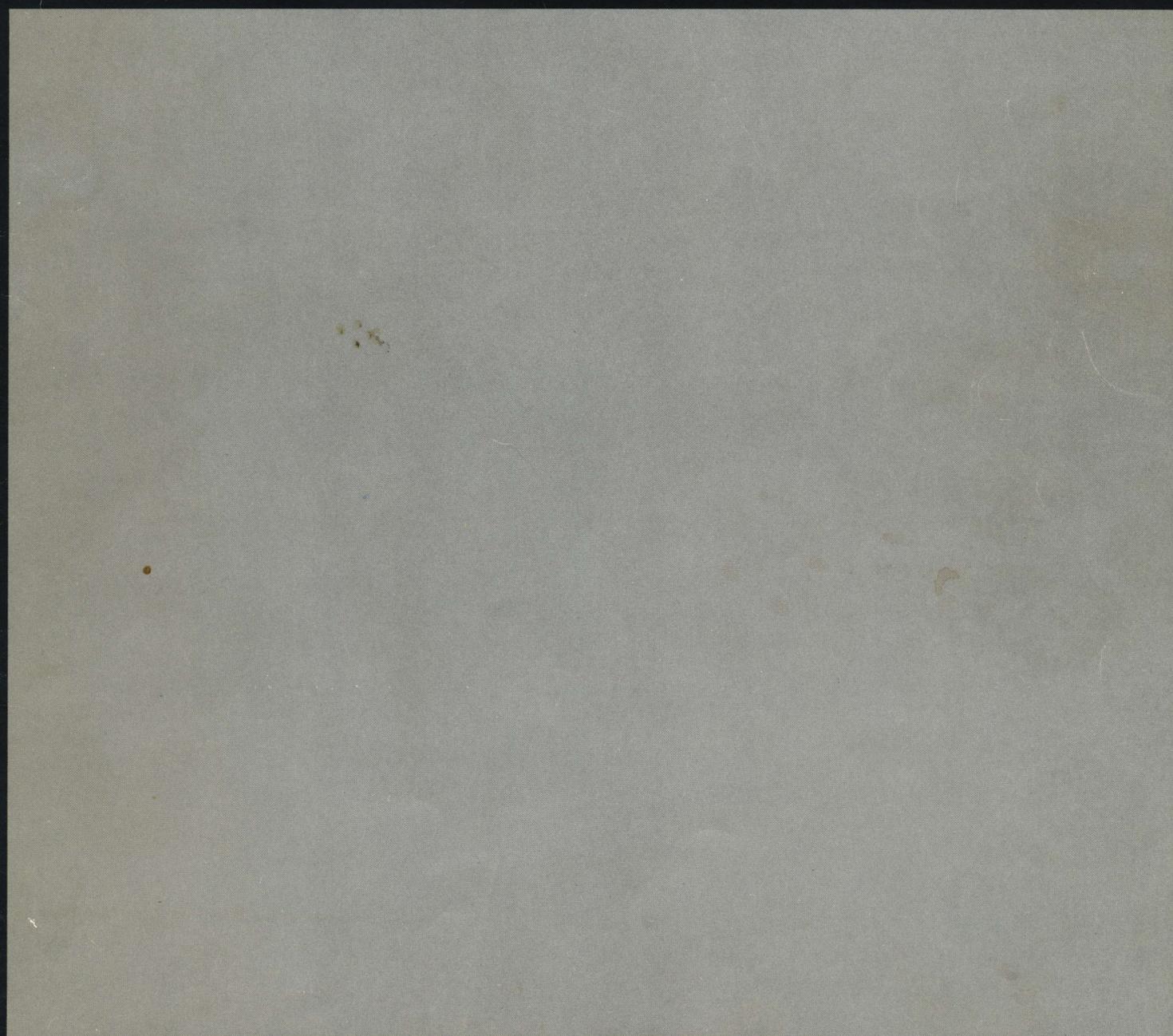


Three Dollars

# Obscura

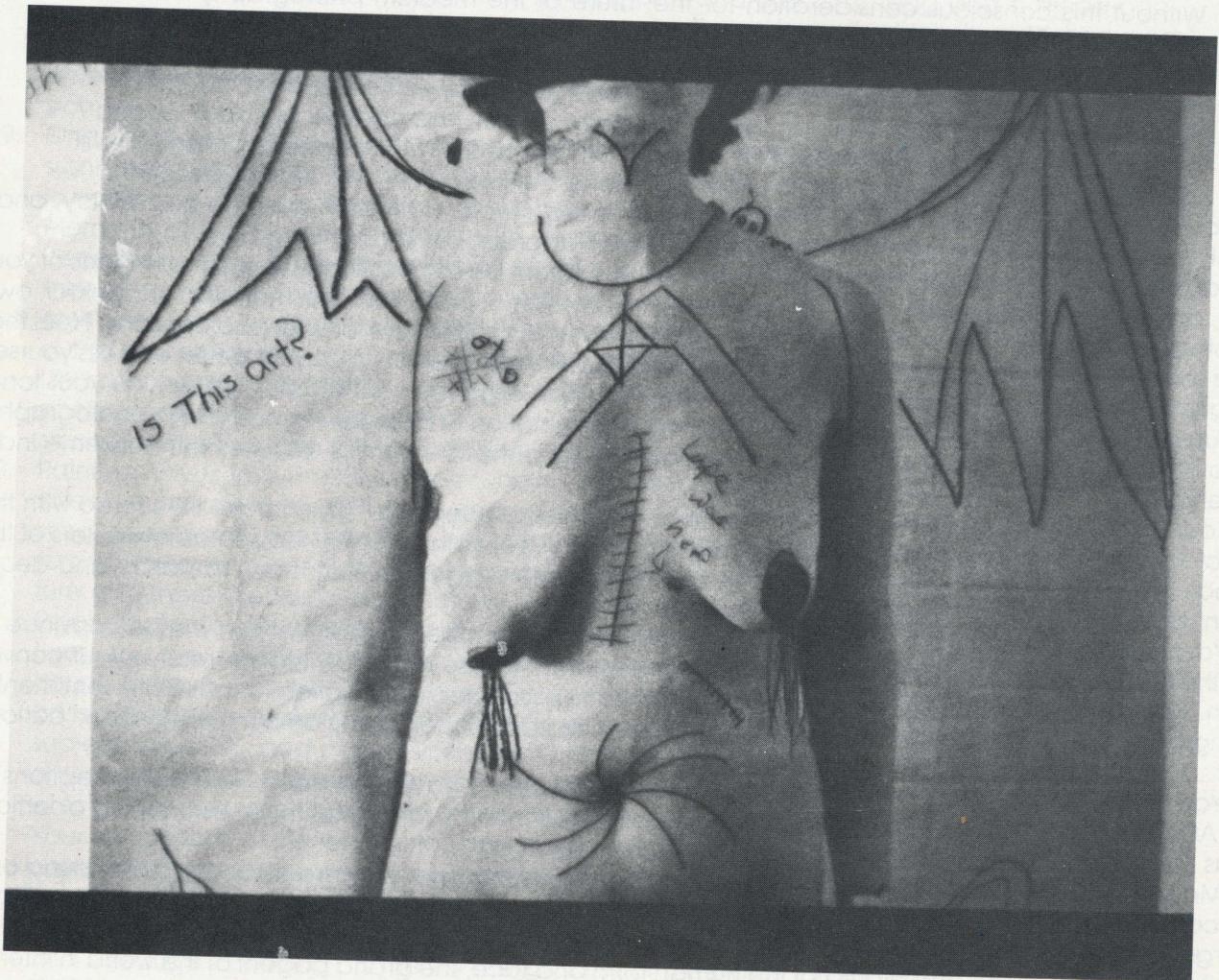
The journal of the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies



# Nina Salerno: Meaning, Use and Placement

by James Hugunin

This is one of a continuing series of articles on emerging women artists which have been appearing in **Afferimage**. James Hugunin is editor of **Dumb Ox**.



Untitled Installation, silver print, plastic overlay and grease pencil.

## I. Introduction

How something is used has a great deal to do with how we decode its meaning. If I am cleaning my darkroom and grab a discarded photograph from the trash in order to use it as a dust pan in which to sweep the dirt from the floor, that photograph's meaning is defined as a tool, an instrument of purely utilitarian considerations. However, I may be doing a performance piece in an alternative art space in which the action involves sweeping dust onto a photograph; here the overt use of the photograph may appear merely utilitarian, but the context of my action obviates such a simple interpretation. Obviously, my actions within a particular context adds a significant variable to the decipherment of the meaning behind my activity. Not only does use affect meaning then, but the context of that use must be considered too.

Use and style can be equated.<sup>1</sup> An athlete may use his body in certain characteristic ways, defining his style; a racing car driver may maneuver his vehicle through the turns with a certain flourish, or a photographer may use the photographic medium in a particular fashion. but this use or style becomes fully meaningful when seen "in situ". A racing car driver's high-speed daring becomes foolhardy and illegal on the freeway, but totally expected on the race course. An architectural photographer would hardly show up on the job with an Instamatic. Society at large anchors meanings by establishing the "proper" use of things within particular situations.

In academic photography use and context have been established within certain safe limits, anchoring photographic meaning in a gently harbor under the patronage of the harbor-masters of the medium. Photographic works are often put into "dry dock", that is, into a gallery context, photographic journals, and other such esthetically-raised places of scholastic scrutiny, where the image is examined for its "see-worthiness". If the harbor-masters fail to find farseeing possibilities in the photograph, it is either scuttled for safety's sake or sent out of the harbor to face the vicissitudes of the open-see, opinion in general. Once situated within the institution of academic photography, photographic usage becomes largely determined by formal moves: how one approaches the use of optical laws (camera-vision), how one manipulates space and time, whether one uses color or conventional black and white or non-silver processes, and so forth. These formal problems are set by the critical interpretation of photographic history and recent photographic practice, making style or usage more a problem of surface effects of mere novelty like the changing of car styles each year, rather than a collision between a recalcitrant medium and an expressive being.

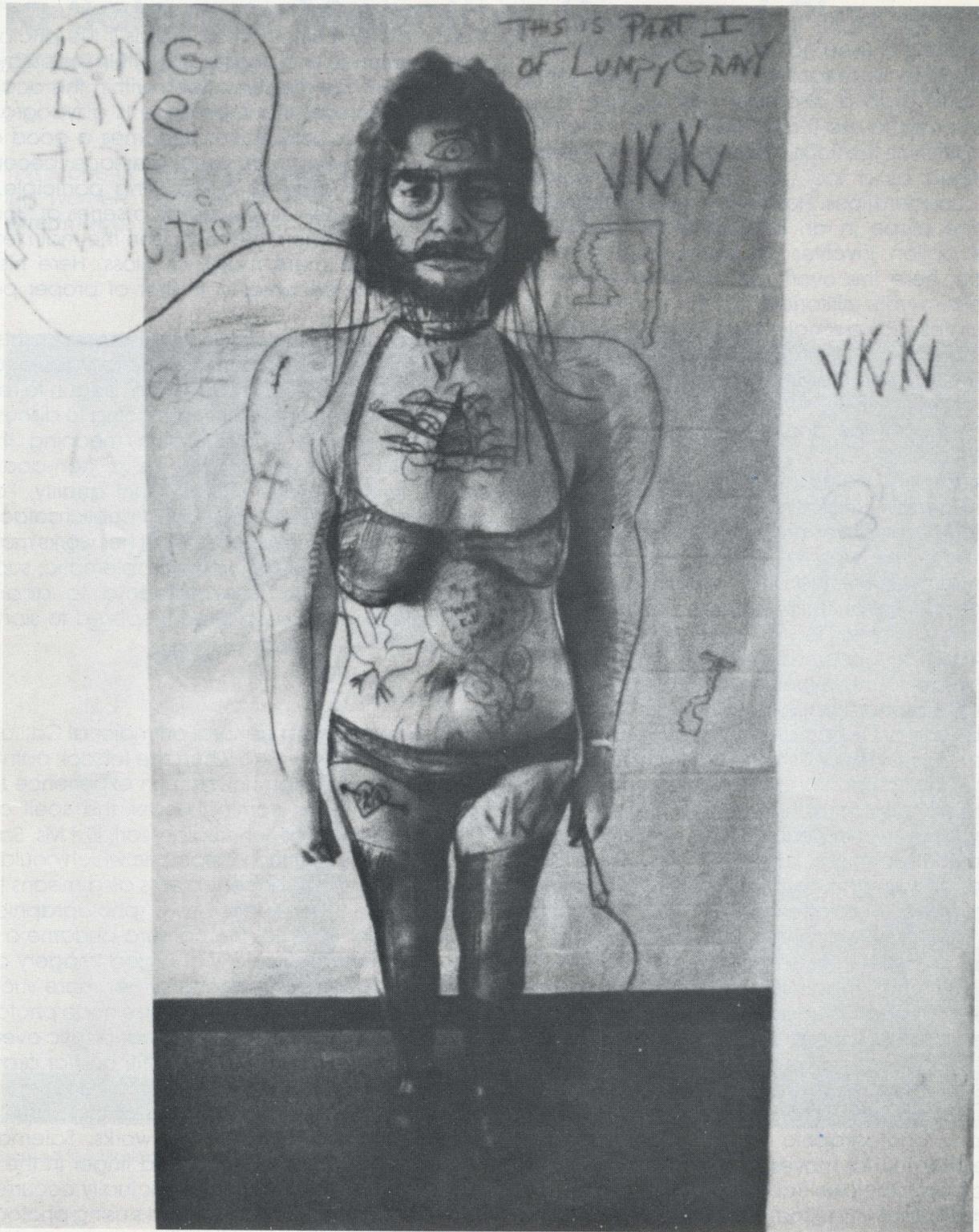
Like car design, this novelty of style or usage is confined to a fairly strict syntax. It is as if the photograph was a sentence or a paragraph within the essay of the overseers of the medium. Seen within this academic context technical incompetence is a typographical error, a clever eclecticism becomes a good quotation, an inappropriate visual passage becomes a misplaced modifier or a dangling participle, overt political statement is viewed as a series of "loaded" words, and any commentary upon the main text itself is reduced to mere marginal gloss. Here historical development becomes a matter of proper pagination.

The artworks I have previously discussed in this series have challenged accepted photographic usage, and in the case of Ms. Youdelman, begun to reassess context. The woman's work I am going to discuss here upsets academic photographic meaning through situational surprise, as well as a non-academic stance toward usage ("bad" print quality, "dumb" record shots, extreme scale, and public defacement of her imagery). The placement of her works makes an esthetic reading of her works problematic; such ambivalences would be anathema to academic photography where no effort is spared to signify the artness of the product.

## II. Nina Salerno

Ms. Salerno was a general art major at California Institute of the Arts in 1976 when she forsook painting for photography, not an uncommon experience for promising art majors coming under the spell of such faculty members as John Baldessari. But Ms. Salerno's photography meant an Instamatic which could quickly and accurately render objects as a means toward other ends than kudos from photographic connoisseurs. For Salerno, the camera became a tool to help her interface socially charged imagery against societal expectations. In one of her more successful works this artist hung a near life-size nude photograph of herself on a wall and put a clear plastic overlay on it, allowing people to write graffiti and/or draw over her image. Daily photographic documentation recorded the changing aspects of this participatory installation. In another of her works, Salerno hung large prints depicting an injured finger in the wood-working shop where the injury actually occurred.

One of her earliest student works using photography consisted in a "response" to the manager of the Cal Arts Physical Plant who billed Salerno for services rendered when she resided in the campus dormitory. "Wanted" posters were offset printed on which Salerno was depicted mug-shot fashion, holding greasy chicken bones to her face. Several snaps from various viewpoints underscored the humor and grossness of the activity. As an accompanying caption the artist



Untitled Installation, silver print, plastic overlay and grease pencil.

reproduced the letter she received from the school maintenance office:

Dear Nina Salerno,

You have a bill for \$12.00 due to physical plant coming Saturday to unplug your toilet of chicken bones.

Signed,  
Physical Plant

Here Salerno consciously equated her minor run in with the school bureaucracy with criminality, with the artist as a pariah. The piece, although clearly a student effort, became a model for anti-social behavior interfacing with authoritative formality. (This incident came back to haunt the school authorities when Salerno in turn billed the administration for damages wrought to her entry in a Cal Arts sponsored student exhibition.) This early work contained qualities developed further in more mature works: 1) accessibility versus inaccessibility; 2) a bratish nose-thumbing at authority; 3) art versus life; 4) multiple imagery; 5) casual approach to technique; 6) non-gallery context; 7) the use of the human body as a "cultural vehicle"; and, 8) a use of the photograph as an indexical sign, that is, as an implicative or ostensive pointer (much like a weather-vane indicates or points).

Two years later Salerno went through a "dry" period in her art-making; in order to merely keep up the discipline of working so many hours a day in her studio she began to make little abstract, egg-shaped objects, destined for friends' coffee tables. In moving these small objects from studio to coffee table and then to a gallery setting, Salerno became aware of how the meaning of these objects were conditioned by where they were encountered. Salerno stopped doing these little sculptures and began to concentrate upon the effects of context in her work. She then embarked on a series of pieces which were installed in various "non-art" locales about the Cal Arts campus.

The first of these installations took over the lounge area of the women's restroom. The space was accessible to females, but not to males; an attraction/repulsion duality was established by the artist when she had the floor strewn with thorns, put annoying bits of string hanging from the ceiling at face level, left an opened tuna can out to add a repulsive odor, then contrasted those qualities with colored lighting, curious styrofoam balls on the floor, and sweet smelling perfume. The show's announcement depicted a rose (attractive), drawn and colored in a garish (repulsive) manner. (The installation was a little reminiscent of the early feminist works stemming from Judy Chicago's influence at Cal Arts when that feminist taught there.) Salerno felt the piece to be an

instructive failure, the decorativeness of work obscuring her actual intentions. Consequently, in late 1978 she did another installation, or "non-installation", since nothing was actually put on display.

Salerno reserved gallery space at the school, sent out announcements, then locked the gallery space and put up a notice on the door:

Before you enter please read:

- 1) remove all metallic objects from your person.
- 2) don't bring in any liquids or food into this space.
- 3) lit objects, such as cigarettes or pipes, are forbidden.
- 4) to obtain key for entry, go to Physical Plant and see Mary.

The disappointed visitor had to trundle over to the maintenance area to follow the bureaucratic procedure for key possessions: 1) obtain a confirming slip from Physical Plant, 2) go to the cashier's office and leave a five dollar key deposit, 3) return to Physical Plant with the receipt, 4) obtain the key, 5) march up several flights of stairs, only to find that the key doesn't even fit the lock! Again Salerno toys with the attraction/repulsion dichotomy.

If the audience was the victim of an elaborate joke in this piece, in Salerno's next work the artist set herself up for vilification. A 5'6" x 3' nude photograph of the artist was hung in a hallway near the cafeteria. The image was shot with a wide-angle lens, making the artist definitely appear sexually unappealing. The image is startlingly reminiscent of an unflattering view of oneself nude before a mirror. A grease pencil "urged" the viewer to make additions to the piece by scrawling over the plastic hung over the print. Each night Salerno would photograph the resulting defacement and wipe it clean for another day's abuse. This went on for twenty days, during which time the Institute's administrators asked Salerno to take down the installation during a visit of some wealthy benefactors. She refused, so a hefty gentleman was asked to stand in front of the photograph while the distinguished guests passed the installation unaware of the monstrosity hidden from view.

Unlike the violation of imagery seen in Jenny Wrenn's work (see the preceding article in this series), this photograph was violated by the audience. But it wasn't so much that a *photograph* was defaced, as that of the physical, the sexual, integrity of the female body. The graffiti documented by Salerno showed little esthetic imagination (unusual for the context) and largely remained sexually abusive and infantile. Some quotes from the documentation:

"You are very ugly"

"Suck me" (written on a breast)

"Nina, your mother called, she wants  
you to take this filth down"  
"Naughty, naughty"  
"Good Boobies"

In one day's documentation, a beard had been scrawled over Salerno's face and a whip drawn in her hand. One woman confessed her sexual love for the artist. In another day's more unusual graffiti, spurting penis' were drawn at the bottom of the photograph. Highly seductive images of women are not subjected to such vitriol, the implied sexual violence being shunted off into fantasy. But Salerno's mundane self-portrait frustrates those fantasies as her nudity is not lustful. She is even depicted wearing shoes and socks (no fetishistic gratification to be had here). In fact, in a record shot of the installation someone had drawn in heels and stocking on the overlay.

Over a period of time an interesting relationship arose between this violated image of Salerno and her actual physical presence around the campus as she continued to interact with her fellow students. It was as if she had created a "double", a "doppleganger" in this abused photographic clone. The installation raised issues concerning the relationship of the *photograph* to be *photographed*, how one perceives "photogenicness" in our culture, and comments upon the widespread hostility covertly or overtly directed at women in our culture. The relationship between sexuality and violence in our society becomes explicit in this piece, in fact the installation was vandalized, torn down by certain individual(s) who must have felt threatened by the display. It is questionable whether such defacement or even the extent of the graffiti would have been as great or as abusive if the artist had placed it in a specific gallery context. If the artist had put up similar self-portraits around the campus in designated gallery spaces as well as common access routes, she could have compared the effects of context on the content of the graffiti, pushing her piece into a more firm sociological posture. The whole piece would then have existed in final form as a collection of data, rather than just a collection of slides without any dates annotated so one can make a chronological ordering of the graffiti.

Salerno's use of photography in this installation forsakes formal manipulation in itself for an exploration of culturally determined sexual signifiers. Here choice of a wide-angle lens, the careful attention to her posture in the image, her decision to retain wearing shoes and socks are all formal moves that were dictated to Salerno by the end she wanted to achieve. At this point the artist selected a "good" 35mm camera as her equipment, realizing the poor image quality of an Instamatic negative was inappropriate. What is happening here is that Salerno decides upon certain types of meaning she wants to result from her work,

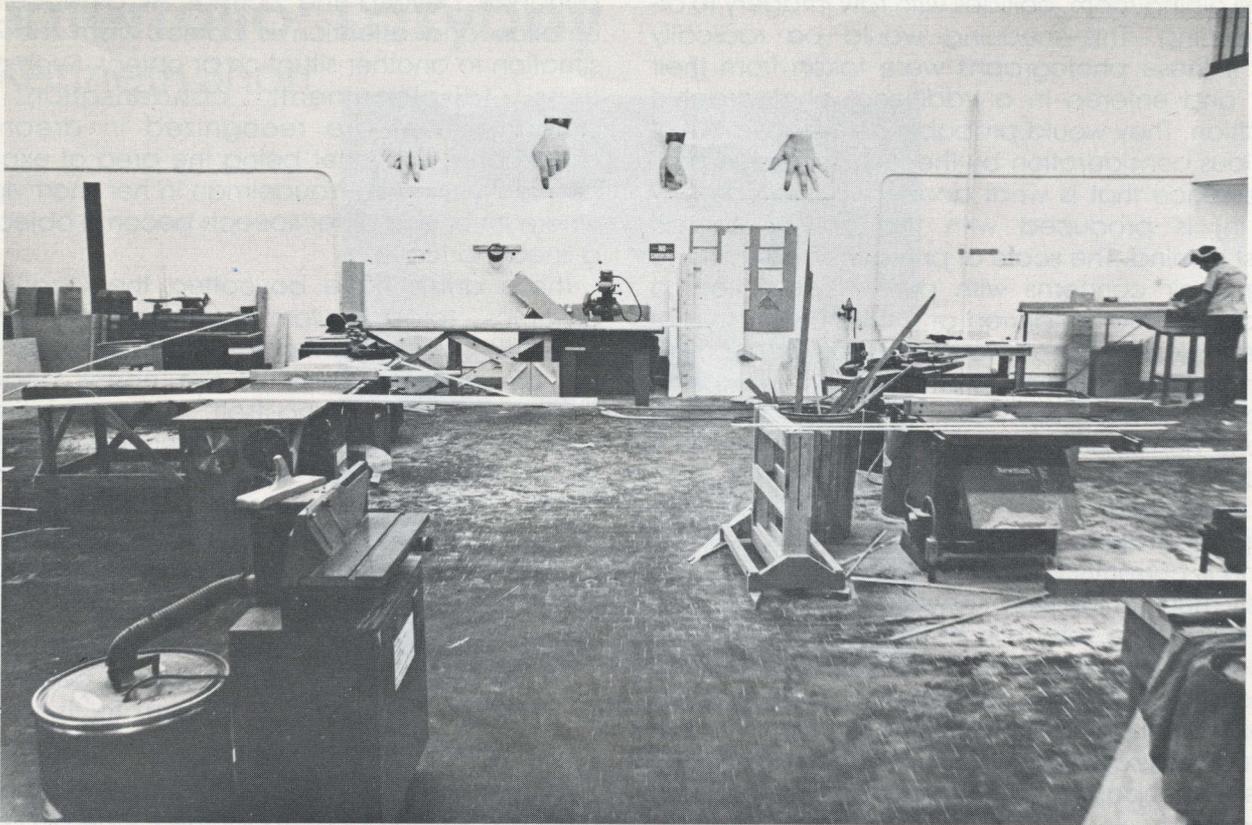
then uses the medium as intermediary for her ideas. A lot of photography is produced in just the opposite fashion, with the means being an apriori given and meaning following from that apriori.

In February 1979 Salerno heard about a minor accident that had occurred in the school's woodshop. Tracking down the slightly injured woman, the artist photographed the shopworker's cut finger in four different poses, making large 3' x 4' prints. These were covered with plastic to shield them from sawdust, and hung up over the equipment in the shop on a wall facing the main entrance into the woodshop. The anonymity of the snapshots assured the reading of these images as warning signs, as pointers to potential hazards as well as literally pointing to the saw which cut the victim's finger. Like most of Salerno's pieces no title was display, only a very small signature written on the photographs.

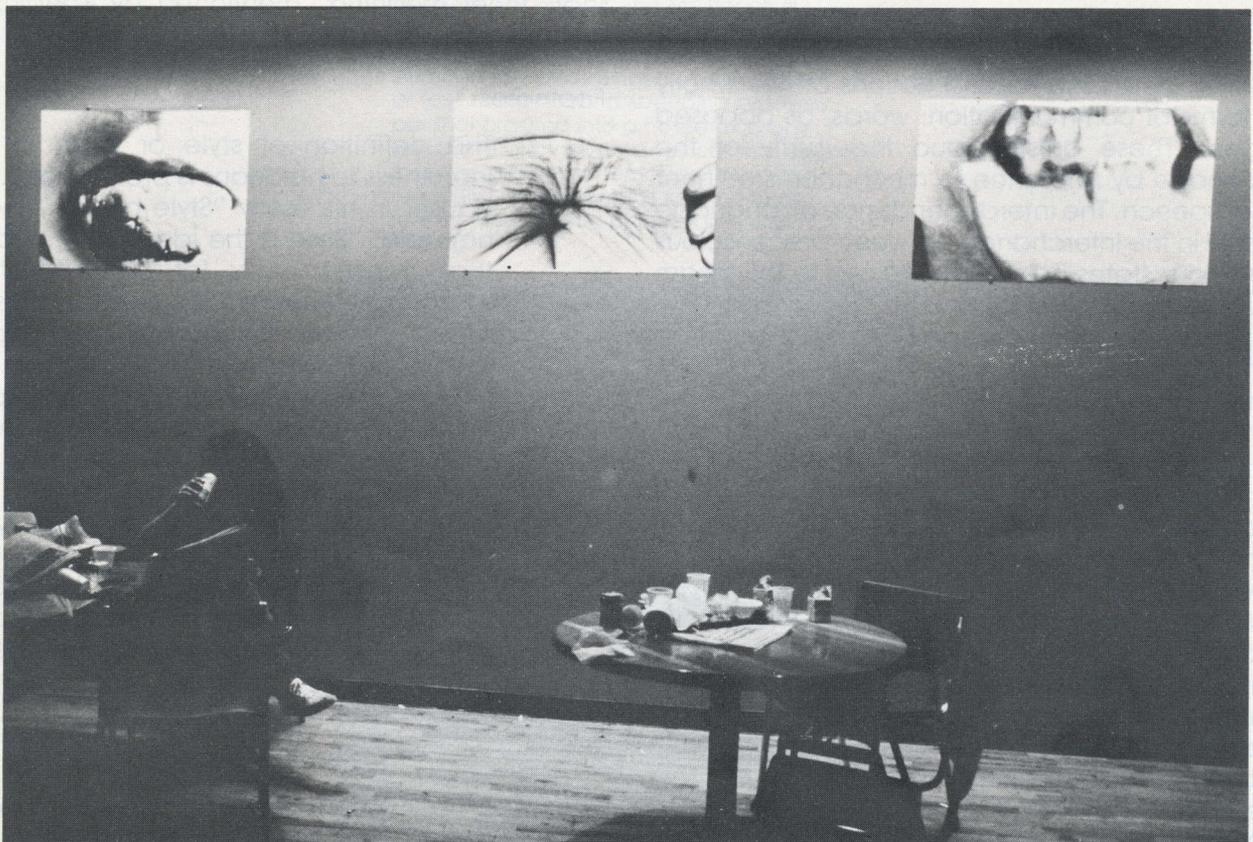
The four photographs are run linearly across the wall. The first enlargement compares one wounded finger to one normal digit; the second depicts the injured finger pointing down, directly at the offending saw; the third photograph was shot from an angle with the finger curled up slightly, obscuring the wound, distorting the hand; the final image shows one hand, palm down, with four normal fingers and one cut. The formal arrangement here "makes sense" as the two outside photographs establish a symmetry around the two inside images, but one is not hyper-conscious of this arrangement. The esthetics of this installation are subtle, too subtle for one viewer who tore down the photographs. He was later made to rehang Salerno's installation—being "convinced" by an insistant faculty member.

Two months later the artist created another installation which met with approval, as the photographs are still hanging intact. In the campus cafeteria Salerno hung three 3' x 4' photographs on a wall near eating tables. The enlargements are close-ups of: 1) front teeth with the lower lip being pulled down; 2) a belly button and wrinkles; 3) a mouth with a tongue protruding in such a fashion that it appears as if a wrinkled fruit were in the mouth instead. Each image distorts a body part in subtle, disturbing ways. This is consistent with Salerno's repeated use of body imagery and mode of photographing. (These types of distortions are carried over into video tapes by the artist, where sound and motion enhance the result).

The "tasteless" imagery of these depictions, hung in a situation where social proprieties are most restrictive, comes as a bit of a shock when one first enters the cafeteria. The images harbor a latent eroticism and implied violence which parallels the sexual and violent connotations surrounding eating, specifically eating meat. The content of these images cut through the veneer of etiquette culture has overlayed onto a basic survival function. Social formality, contextualiz-



untitled installation silver print



untitled installation silver print

ed in the dining room, collides with raw imagery to affect meaning. This meaning would be radically altered if these photographs were taken from their context and entered in a traditional photographic competition. They would probably be laughed out of any serious consideration by the jury. The salon print (for in essence that is what academic photography results in) is produced with the gallery context foremost in mind. The scale of prints, their attention to matting, their concerns with pure vision reflect a usage of the medium aimed at a connoisseurship of elite pretension. Salerno's work would be an anomaly in that context. The sort of visual rewards one expects in academic photography cannot be found in Salerno's work. Her appeal is to a distinctly different sensibility and use of the medium, a use which, however, should not exclude critical examination of the work from a photographic point of view.

Salerno is currently beginning graduate studies, so obviously much of the work I have discussed here can be faulted for the retention of the art school institutional context the work remains within, despite her attempts at going beyond a mere gallery context. Salerno's next step in her development is to carry these contextual considerations into a more diverse social scheme. The impact of the work should be that much more powerful.

### III. Summary

Youdelman, Wright, Lindroth, Wrenn and Salerno define an anti-formalist, "scripto-visual" photographic praxis which belies the idealist notions of two wholly distinct forms of communication: words, as opposed to images.<sup>2</sup> These artists cloud the purity of the camera image by reference to mechanisms of inner and outer speech. The interdependence of language and image in the interchange between preconscious and conscious states has been attested to by dream analysis (specifically Freud) and studies in cognitive development (Piaget). Propaganda, advertising, in addition to art and poetry make use of associations latent in the reader/viewer as determined by societal context and personal experience. Youdelman and Salerno are particularly sensitive to these unconscious cultural assumptions held by a cross-section of the populace and determinate in how one reads a "text". In Salerno's work the assumed notions of specific contexts (restrooms, galleries, cafeterias, workshops) are used as largely unconscious material which the artist then juxtaposes to her images. Shifts in meaning occur due to the collision between latent and overt contents. In Youdelman's book "Water and Power" we saw precisely this kind of shift occurring as the artist began a chain of associations from a mere name of a utility service to notions of political mystification. In Youdelman's use of the trivial something gains an im-

portance beyond the normal. A displacement of emotion and attention is carried from the original situation to another situation or object. Such associations (displacement, condensation, overdetermination) are recognized in dreams and daydreams, the latter being the area of experience frequently used by Youdelman in her short vignettes, where inner and outer speech become objectified in a linear narrative.

These artists have boycotted the "Szarkowskian olympics", foregoing formal gymnastics of camera vision. This is not to say that these artists thus far discussed are not cognizant of the norms peculiar to Photography (the "thing-itself", the frame, time, and vantage-point), but that they do not use variables in a merely self-referential equation (the Greenbergian foregrounding of pure usage). One of the fathers of modernism has qualified his concerns with the sheer formal possibilities of art in a quote apropos this discussion:

"The artist must have something to say, for mastery over form is not his goal but rather the adapting of form to its inner meaning."<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this adaptation of formal possibility to meaning which accounts for the range of diversity in the works produced by the women I have been discussing in this series. When form no longer serves that "inner meaning" mentioned by Kandinsky, art becomes merely academic.

### Footnotes:

1. The definition of style or even its meaningfulness to historians is problematic. Arnold Hauser in his essay "Style and Its Changes" has said: "Style is the ideal unity of a whole that consists in a lot of concrete and disparate elements." It is precisely this "ideal unity" that has been attacked as a mere abstraction. To complicate matters, in the evolution of styles Wylie Sypher has noted (in his book *Rococo To Cubism in Art and Literature*) that techniques appear in advance of the mature styles. This leads Sypher to distinguish between a genuine style and what he terms "stylization", which is the use of a certain technique. For the sake of brevity I am lumping style and stylization together when I refer to *use* or *usage* in this essay.
2. For a detailed discussion of the "scripto-visual" see Victor Burgin's article "Seeing Sense", *Artforum*, Feb. 1980.
3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Books, 1977, p.54. □