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**Interoffice Memos from the Bicycle Factory:  
Reconsidering the Work of M. Richard Kirstel**

by A. D. Coleman

Almost exactly twenty years after Richard Kirstel was arrested on the campus of Towson State College for attempting to fulfill his contract with that school to mount an exhibit of "Pas de Deux," his sequences of erotic photographs, an exchange of letters on the subject of those photographs appeared in the pages of the journal *Afterimage*.

During the interim, Kirstel had been tried and convicted as a felon for having the temerity to insist on hanging his work per agreement; the American Civil Liberties Union had fought his case all the way up to the Supreme Court, which, under the guidance of Chief Justice Warren Burger, chose to duck the issue of freedom of vision, letting the verdict stand; Kirstel had thus been forced to serve two years' probation on the felony charge, and to pay a fine plus court costs.

Thereafter, Judge John Grason Turnbull, who presided over the trial, and Assistant State's Attorney Stuart Hirsch, who prosecuted, both were removed from office for a variety of illegal activities and betrayals of their oaths.

Towson President James L. Fisher, who'd hoped (incorrectly) that ordering Kirstel's arrest would catapult him into public office, has apologized publicly, over the radio, to Kirstel and the entire academic community for his blatant violation of First Amendment rights and disregard for academic freedom. And Kirstel — one of whose mottoes is "outlast the bastards" — has gone on: to receive an award from the city of Baltimore for crime prevention; to pursue distinguished careers as an influential photographer, theorist and teacher; to initiate yet another career, as a local character actor; and to function as a perennial thorn in the side of the forces of dumbness in Baltimore, his adoptive home town, and points north, south, and west.

The making of the "Pas de Deux" photographs, their numerous public presentations, and the precedents they established were clearly major milestones in Kirstel's life; some, myself among them, would argue that they were momentous occasions in the medium's recent history, anticipating as they did by two decades the current uproar over the works of Mapplethorpe and Serrano. So when Kirstel learned that the German artist Wolf Vostell, a member of the Fluxus Group, had built a work called "Heuschrecken" ("Locusts") around half a dozen enlargements — one of them eight feet square — of images from "Pas de Deux," without bothering to credit their maker, and had sold the result to a European art museum for a small fortune, he wrote to *Afterimage*, which had published an illustration of the Vostell piece, and accused Vostell of plagiarism.

Vostell's response was that Kirstel's images were "found objects," and that he, Vostell, had taken these artifacts and made of them "something relevant and meaningful in a new, artistic context. I can't imagine," he

concluded, "that the bicycle factory protested when Marcel Duchamp declared its product an artwork."

This is fascinating stuff. Obviously, if Vostell is right, photographic imagery capable of sparking a major censorship case that goes all the way to the Supreme Court is irrelevant and meaningless until Vostell co-opts it for his own use. Despite its record of exhibitions and publications, that imagery hasn't functioned in "a new, artistic context" till it makes its way into a museum under Vostell's name. And the maker of that imagery — who paid an uncommonly high price for his boldness in making it and presenting it under his own name — is, it seems, supposed to feel grateful for Vostell's looting of his work, and to accept Vostell's cavalier equating of the work of an epic poet in photography with the output of an industrial enterprise.

Now, Kirstel is certainly justified in feeling robbed, and is legitimately outraged over not only his mugger's effrontery but the arrogant, specious self-servingness of his defense. Nonetheless, I find the analogue Vostell chose fascinating, and rewarding to contemplate. For if these photographs surrounding you are in fact mere memos from the bicycle factory, what an extraordinary enterprise it must be!

Consider the necessary complexity of its workforce. Here you have work that is muscular and virile, yet also so attuned to the empathetic and intuitive that it is considered by many to be prototypical feminist art. It is superbly crafted; those who know the early works here from previous interpretations in silver will see that Kirstel's abilities as a printmaker have increased over time — but those skills, though virtuosic, always serve the content of the imagery. The

world that imagery constructs is intellectually provocative, emotionally challenging, and sensually intense. And an examination of the dates on which these artifacts made their public debut indicates that they were, individually and cumulatively, prophetic in their relation to the photography to come.

"Pas de Deux," as noted, addressed both heterosexual and lesbian lovemaking explicitly, in 1969. By then, its maker's concern with the taboo as a core issue and with extended form — sequences, suites, and other multi-image structures — was already established. "Karen's Party," which appeared shortly thereafter, was one of the most ambitious sequences of directorial imagery attempted up till then; here the relationship between photography and theater was clearly identified, narrative structure was explored, and the issue addressed — women and madness — had never been probed so profoundly in photography. "Recess," which would follow it some years later, manifests an even more demented and violent take on that subject; for this viewer it's always served as a visual metaphor of the struggle between female twins in the womb. And "Street Play," the current work-in-progress ("a suite of non-sequiturs," according to its manufacturer), is no less unsettling than what's preceded it though somehow more cheerful in its insistent lunacy.

There's also work not represented here — particularly the "Water Babies" and "Florida Condo" series — but produced during these same two decades, in which another of the great taboos, death, is investigated at length. If, as the poet William Butler Yeats once wrote, the only subjects fit for the contemplation of the adult mind are sex and death, then this workplace determinedly produces images by adults and for adults.

So there we have it: a "bicycle factory" that, since 1969, has produced

imagery potent enough to provoke arrest and censorship, imagery that for twenty years has pioneered the directorial mode, serial structure, and innovation in narrative form to address the most charged issues of human existence, imagery that constitutes one of the most substantial and carefully-redacted *oeuvres* in post-war American photography. If I were to tell you that it's the output of a one-man operation, would you not find that remarkable? And if I were to suggest that the man who runs it is not only entitled but morally obligated to affix his name to his work for all to see, wouldn't you agree?

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