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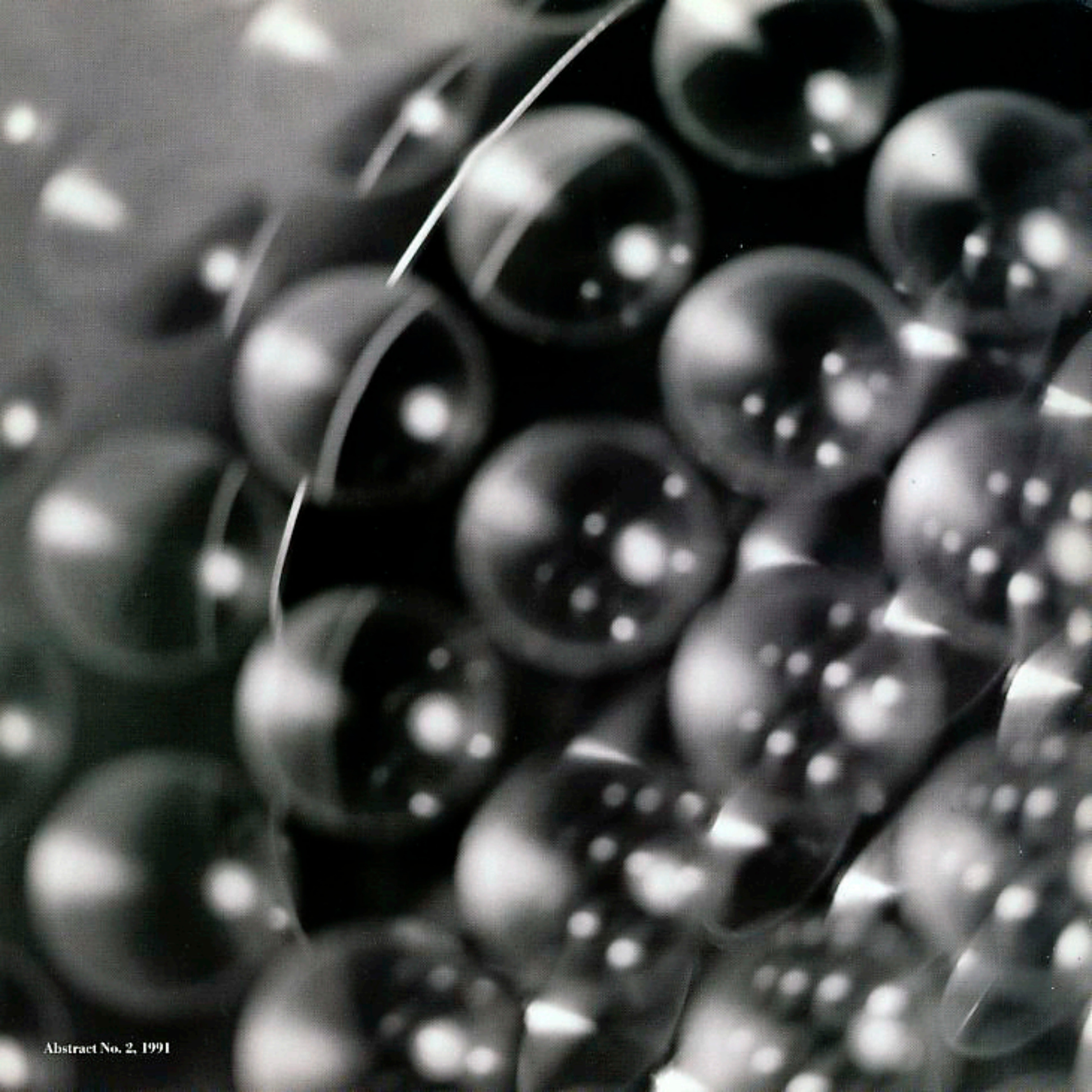
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Visual overload—an occupational hazard if you are in the art world. Images abound. Some we seek out. Some are thrust upon us. Very few remain in our memory to tantalize and delight us.

Ellen Carey's images remained in my memory, long after I first saw them at her 1989 John Good Gallery exhibition. And they continued to tantalize me.

Carey's work spoke to me as a woman. Often, looking at myself in a mirror, I would recall the imaginative use she made of her own face, marvel at her inventiveness, and speculate about the psychological implications of her self portraits for herself and for other women.

Her photographs struck me also as the director of an art and music program that thrives in the halls of science—a program that takes as its inspiration Albert Einstein's statement, "All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree." The theoretical duality of art and science has been noted by many philosophers besides Einstein. For me, Ellen Carey's later photographs embody this complementarity.

Thus it was that a year after I had first seen her work, Arts in the Academy invited Carey to develop an exhibition presenting an overview of her photography of the past seven years. Quite by coincidence, a similar idea had occurred to Patrick McCaughey, Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, who has curated a show of Ellen Carey's work from 1978 to 1991, on view at the Atheneum May 17 to August 16, concurrent with the Academy show.

With the gracious and generous support of the Polaroid Corporation, particularly Sam Yanes, Director of Corporate Communications and Barbara Hitchcock, Director of Corporate Cultural Affairs, the Academy was able to bring the project to fruition. We wish to express our grateful appreciation to Polaroid and to others who contributed to the exhibition: Dr. John Gibbons of Hartford, Connecticut; Jayne H. Baum of the Jayne H. Baum Gallery, New York City; and collectors of Carey's work who loaned the Academy important works—the Polaroid Corporation, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Edward Downe, Jr. and Timothy Greenfield-Sanders of New York City; Ian Glennie, Director of the Texas Gallery in Houston, Texas; and First Bank System, Inc. of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

*Fredrica W. Wechsler*     *Director, Arts in the Academy*     *April 1992*

ELLEN CAREY

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, WASHINGTON, DC  
JUNE 9 TO SEPTEMBER 9, 1992







# BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ELLEN CAREY

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Critical commentary on the remarkable levée of women photographers of the 1980s has tended to focus on artists like Barbara Kruger, Sherric Levine, and Louise Lawler, which is to say on work that can easily be seen as critical commentary in itself. It is hardly surprising that critics should enlarge most enthusiastically on the work that most immediately shares their own guild-values, and in a period that combined political reaction with a new feeding frenzy in the art market, this response was quite understandable, even desirable. Yet among the things forgotten in the rush to recode art photography as criticism of media ideologies was the original utopian promise of modernism. This is the promise that made whole schools of women artists in the first place possible; rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated by analysts of postmodernism.

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In her self-portraits of the 1980s and her abstractions of the 1990s, Ellen Carey has retrieved and refined this promise. In doing this, a lesser artist might fall into a vacuous, merely celebratory optimism, but Carey does not lack for subtlety, irony, or art-historical tactics. In fact, since she began using the big Polaroid 20 X 24 camera in 1984, her work has gradually evolved from a neopsychedelia to a neo-modernism, which is to say that she has deliberately evoked historical periods of social and aesthetic progress. By looking backward to moments that looked forward, and by offering a practical interpretation of each moment in question (her psychedelia has more to do with Bridget Riley than with rock concert posters; her neomodernism approaches minimalism), Carey reminds us that the passage from modernism through late modernism to postmodernism was not linear, sequential, and totalizing, but recursive, uneven, and differential.



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This is a lesson we may feel we have already learned from commentaries on painting by critics like Benjamin Buchloh. But if "recursive, uneven, and differential" also means broken into sectors, where do we stand with the camera arts? In film, for example, we have no decisive consensus on what in the first place constitutes modernism (D. W. Griffith? Eisenstein? Orson Welles? Maya Deren? Jean-Luc Godard?) So when Hal Foster tells us, quite persuasively, that contemporary art is conditioned by the remoteness of modernism and the intrusiveness of the media, he is defining a circumstance which is experienced quite differently by camera artists, for whom the terms "modernism" and "media" are not in the first place necessarily distinct. Moreover, if the official grand narrative of modernist photography establishes its century-long continuity by relying heavily on documentary work, we also need a history of that discontinuity by which the camera avant-gardes, which emerged from the art schools in the 1960s and the 1970s, responded across a distinct interval to the moment of high modernism. In that perspective, the accomplishments of Constructivist, Bauhaus, and Surrealist photography had remained quite marginal to official modernism, and were thus available to the new artistic and critical strategies of the years formative for artists like Carey, who are now in their thirties and forties.

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Carey was a founding member of the Hallwalls group, which came together in Buffalo in the mid-1970s and included Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Nancy Dwyer, Michael Zwack, Charles Clough, Anne Turyn, and many others. Before moving to New York in 1979, Carey had her first public show on a Buffalo city bus with Cindy Sherman, and the comparison is instructive. During the 1980s, both women made images of themselves, yet both refused the conventional expectation of the artist's self-portrait, choosing not to endow the self with substance and depth but to question it at the surface. If Sherman suggested confessional traditions, which she then subverted by the serial assumption of fictional identities, Carey kept her distance from directly personal revelation with a problematic of masking, concealment, and camouflage. Rather than relying on traditional (and traditionally feminine) codes of clothing and veiling, Carey decorated and dissimulated herself with fractals, golden sections, and other proportional harmonies found in nature, science, and mathematics. Both women also made critical use of the feminine mystique, Sherman by staging and exacerbating the mutability and elusiveness long associated with woman, Carey by redeploying the calculated detachment of the photographic model, that most widely disseminated of modern images of femininity. (Between 1970 and 1974, Carey funded her undergraduate education at the Kansas City Art Institute by working as a model for Hallmark greeting cards.) While Sherman evoked a past, placing herself among signifiers ranging from B-movies to women of history, Carey evoked a future, placing herself among such signifiers of postmodern



Untitled, 1987



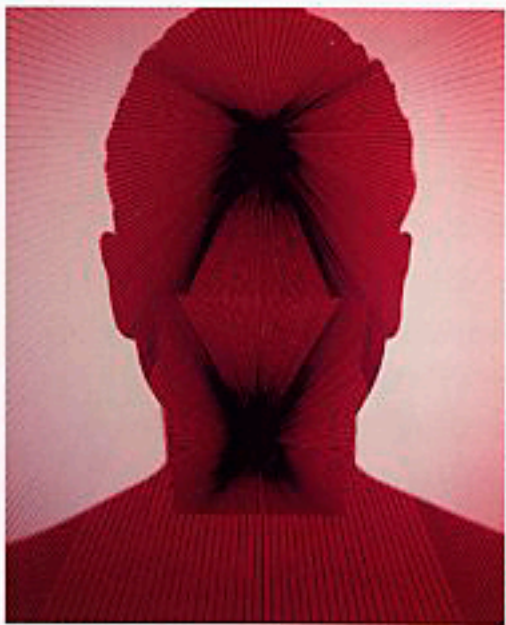




Untitled, 1987



Untitled, 1985



Untitled, 1986



Untitled, 1987



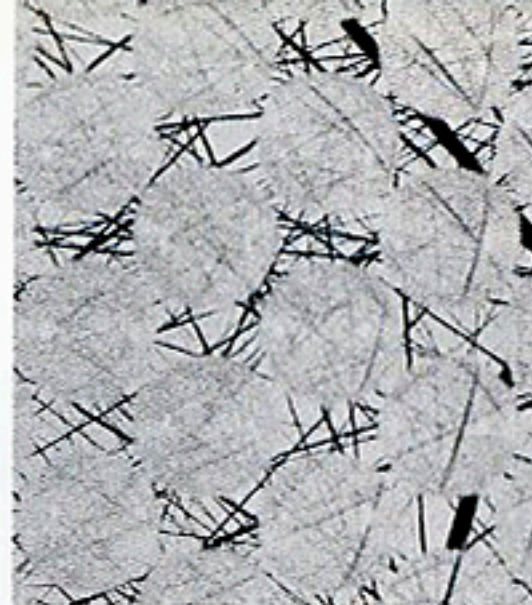
science as Julia sets, Mandelbrot sets, and fractal clusters. With this wry sense of the place of the woman (particularly the woman artist) in the encounter between science and art, Carey is perhaps less reminiscent of Sherman and closer to a figure like Laurie Anderson.

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Carey's late 1980s' transition to abstraction, though gradual, was startling, since she had first come to New York at a New Wave moment which coincided with the exhaustion (and the defunding) of the conceptual/minimal ambit to give rise to graffiti art, to neo-expressionism, to appropriation, to anything but abstraction. In retrospect, however, it seems clear that Carey was not fully accomplished as an artist before her mid-80s neo-geometric work, which is to say that we can see the abstract elements used as overlays in those photographs as forerunners of the more recent and more direct engagement with abstraction.

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The mid-80s Polaroid portraits and self-portraits pose a basic question about the photographic medium: "How did she make this picture?" The reason is that everything we think we know about the Polaroid process would seem to militate against the possibility of the double exposure which Carey uses to such striking effect. With its elementary geometric vocabulary, this work also evokes the camera as an apparatus consisting of a circle and a square (a lens and a box, or a lens and a frame of film). In the difficulty of providing an answer, the question about the medium is postmodern; in its formalism and "materialism," the evocation of the apparatus is neomodern; and, as we have seen, the design of the



Abstract No. 7, 1991

work combines a close-up or medium close-up of a model with an element of Op-inflected psychedelia. Yet the result is anything but regressive, partly because the moments evoked signify as progressive, and partly because they have been consciously superimposed; compare, for example, the neoclassicism of a Robert Mapplethorpe, whose devotion to a pristine photographic surface was clear from his shock when told that earlier in her career Carey had painted on photographs. Carey still speaks today of "painting with light," although the resulting surfaces are much more seamless than those of the earlier literally painted work.

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In "Geometry and Abjection," Victor Burgin argues that Euclidean geometry gave rise to a model of vision as a cone extending outwards from the individual eye or mind, and that this model was intersected in the Renaissance by the picture plane (thus Brunelleschi and "Renaissance perspective"). He concludes that in the century of Einstein and Freud, the cone of vision model is no longer capable of explaining either the eye/mind of the subject or the space that he/she surveys; however, we can now



find the origin of geometry in what Julia Kristeva calls abjection, a movement of revulsion by which the subject is constituted as such. In other words, the subject/object universe of inside vs outside and self vs other is predicated on the abjection of something disagreeable or horrific, something cast out or rejected; I begin to exist by repudiating something which is not-me. "Geometry and Abjection" could readily be transferred as a title to a number of Carey's early Polaroid self-portraits, with their affectless and/or melancholy faces barred and banded by simple geometric designs. (Description here is already interpretation, but these are consensus views.) Carey arrives at a conclusion much like Burgin's, since she proceeds in short order from Euclidean to fractal geometry, from an idea of space centered on the individual subject to a science of chaos in which that subject is dissolved. Thus the diptychs, crosses, diamonds, grids and branches that follow the self-portraits behave like exploded diagrams of the previous work. Gone is the head-on rendering of the self, though the missing link between the self-portraits and the stacking, exponential branch pieces is provided by an arm piece. Gone too is literal superimposition, superseded by a conceptual collage of relationships among much more numerous panels. Individually minimal gestalts (circles, color fields, flowers, framelines) add up to large works of great physical beauty, preoccupied with symmetry and asymmetry, a mapping of self-replicating forms, and transformation across scale.

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The best of the recent black and white work is more authentically minimal, and poses an even more basic question about photographic representation, "What is this a picture of?" The answer is no

more and no less satisfying than what meets the eye; this is work that focuses attention on the specific textures of light, reticulation, framing, and patterning, reminding us both that a photograph is always premised on the real and that it is prejudicial to equate the real with a recognizable representation. This work reminds us too, that although photography has developed in tandem with other media, it also has its own distinct history; unlike neominimalism in painting and sculpture, the return to minimalism in photography is a return to something that hardly existed in the first place, with the exception of some early 1970s' serial work. Once again, however, Carey is not content with mere reminders; the best of her recent work embodies a rare combination of simplicity and innovation, which bodes well for her artistic future.

*Michael Walsh*

*Michael Walsh teaches film studies at the University of Hartford. He has recently published essays on Peter Greenaway, William Burroughs, Jacques Lacan, and Jean Baudrillard.*

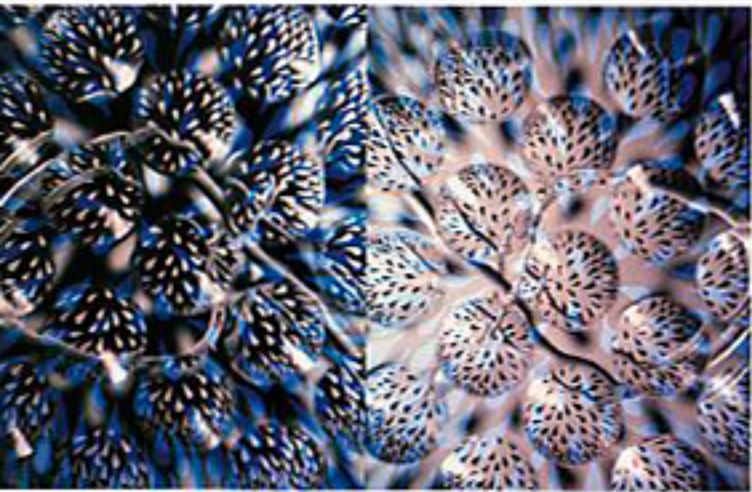
*References:*

*Buchloh, Benjamin.* "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression", in *Modernism and Modernity*, edited by Buchloh et al. Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981. 81-115.

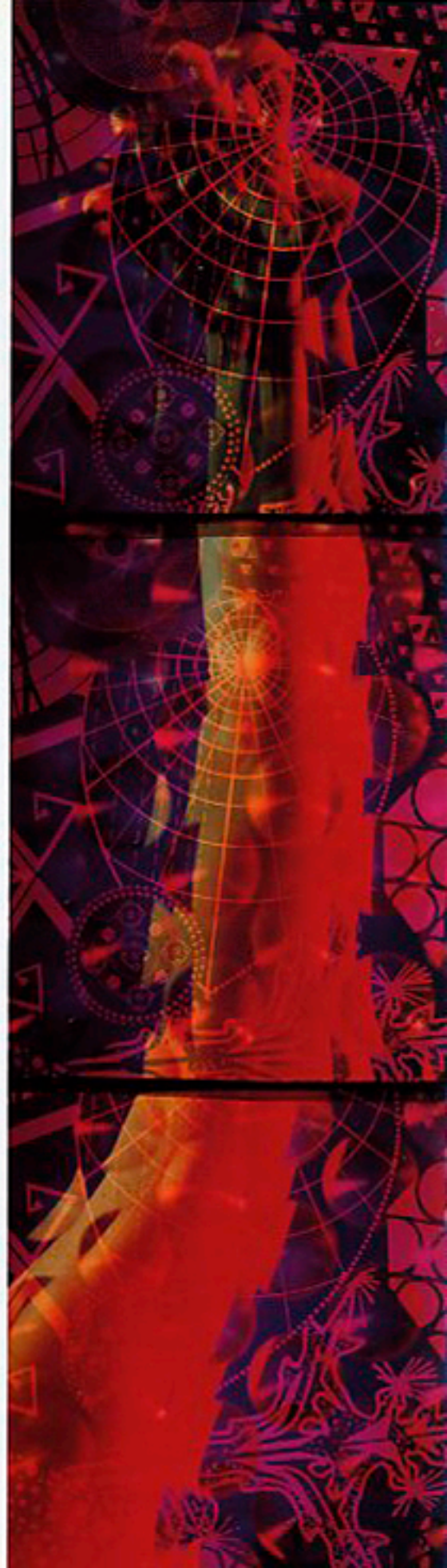
*Burgin, Victor.* "Geometry and Abjection", in *The Cultural Politics of Postmodernism*, edited by John Tagg. SUNY Binghamton: Department of Art and Art History, 1989. 13-31.

*Foster, Hal.* "Between Modernism and the Media", in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Port Washington: Bay Press, 1985. 33-57.



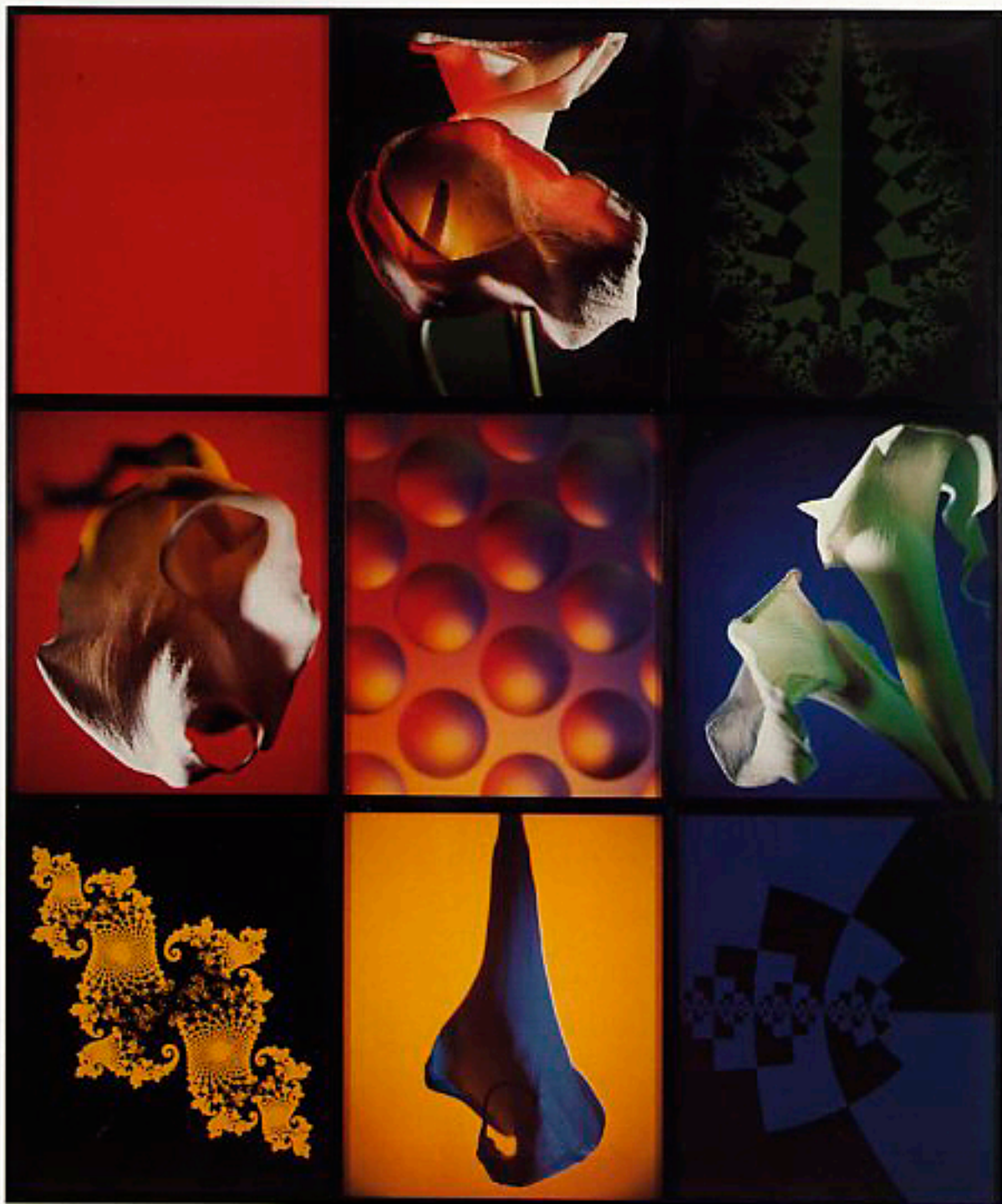


Spring Branch, 1990



Long Arm, 1988





Large Grid, 1988-89



To my parents,  
Ruth Brown and  
Richard Carey

## ELLEN CAREY

### ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS:

1992

Jayne H. Baum Gallery,  
NYC, NY;  
The National Academy of  
Sciences, Washington, DC

1990

Schneider-Blum-Loeb  
Gallery, Chicago, IL

1989

John Good Gallery,  
NYC, NY

1987

International Center of  
Photography, NYC, NY;  
Simon Cerigo, NYC, NY

1986

Art City, NYC, NY;  
Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT;  
Zone, Springfield, MA

1985

Concord Gallery, NYC, NY;  
Dorry Gates Gallery,  
Kansas City, MO

1984

Texas Gallery, NYC, NY

1983

Memorial Union Art Gallery,  
University of California,  
Davis, CA

1982

University Art Museum,  
University of New Mexico,  
Albuquerque, NM

1981

Concord Gallery,  
NYC, NY

1978

Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

1992

*Colt 4; Carey, Keneally, Smith  
and Waite*, Wadsworth  
Athenum, Hartford, CT; catalog  
*Dark Decor*, The Dupree Art  
Center, Holland, MI, catalog  
and circulated (ICI);  
*About Face: Portraits from the  
Permanent Collection*,  
International Center for  
Photography, NYC, NY

1991

*Departures Photography  
1923 - 1990*, Cantor Art  
Gallery, Holy Cross College,  
Worcester, MA, catalog and  
circulated (ICI);  
*The David C. Rittenberg  
Collection*, The Chicago Art  
Institute, IL, catalog;  
*Mixing the Medium; Beyond  
Silver Photography*, Fogg Art  
Museum, Harvard University,  
Cambridge, MA;  
*Fifteen Years of RAW*,  
Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT;  
*Art That Happens To Be  
Photography*, Texas Gallery,  
Houston, TX

1990

*Highlights*, Jayne H. Baum  
Gallery, NYC, NY;  
*5 Person Exhibition*,  
Vrej Baghoomian Gallery,  
NYC, NY;  
*Selections 5*, Bibliotheque  
Nationale, Paris, France, book;  
*Summer Group Exhibition*,  
John Good Gallery,  
NYC, NY;  
*Against Interpretation*,  
C.E.P.A. Gallery, Buffalo, NY

1989

*Fotografie, Wissenschaft und  
neue Technologien*,  
Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf,  
West Germany, catalog;  
*Strange Attractors: The  
Spectacle of Chaos*,  
The Kaos Foundation,  
Chicago, IL, catalog;

*Nature and Culture: Conflict  
and Reconciliation in Recent  
Photography*, The Friends of  
Photography at Ansel Adams  
Center, San Francisco, CA;  
*Abstraction in Contemporary  
Photography*, Emerson  
Gallery, Hamilton College,  
Clinton, NY, catalog;  
*The Photography of Invention:  
American Pictures of the  
1930's*, The National Museum  
of American Art, Smithsonian  
Institution, Washington, D.C.,  
book and circulated;  
*Artists Portraits by Timothy  
Greenfield-Sanders*, Mary  
Boone Gallery, NYC, NY

1988

*Appropriation and Syntax;  
Uses of Photography in  
Contemporary Art*,  
The Brooklyn Museum,  
Brooklyn, NY;  
*Chaos*, John Good Gallery,  
NYC, NY;  
*Woman and Self-Image*, Art  
Museum, Miami University,  
Oxford, OH, catalog;  
*First Person Singular:  
Self-Portrait in Photography,  
1840-1988*, The High  
Museum, Atlanta, GA, catalog;  
*New Surrealism*, The Catskill  
Center for Photography,  
Woodstock, NY, catalog;  
*Photography on the Edge*,  
Haggerty Museum of Art,  
Marquette University,  
Milwaukee, WI, catalog;  
*Complexity and Contradictions*,  
The Zilka Art Gallery,  
Wesleyan University,  
Middletown, CT

1987

*Spirals of Artificiality*,  
Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, catalog;  
*Portrayals*, International  
Center of Photography  
Midtown, NYC, NY, catalog

1986

*Self Portrait/Photography  
1840-1985*,  
National Portrait Gallery,  
London, England, catalog;  
*Modern Art at Harvard*, The  
Sackler Museum, Harvard  
University, Cambridge, MA

1985

*Summer Selections*,  
Castelli Uptown, NYC, NY;  
*KCAI Centennial*,  
The Nelson Atkins Museum,  
Kansas City, MO

1984

*Hallwalls Ten Years*,  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery,  
Buffalo, NY;  
*Patterns*, Laguna Gloria Art  
Museum, Austin, TX;  
*The Heroic Figure, The 17th  
São Paulo Biennale*  
The Rio de Janeiro Museum  
of Modern Art, Brazil, catalog  
and circulated

1983

*Pace/MacGill*, NYC, NY;  
*Faces Since the 50's*, Center  
Gallery, Bucknell University,  
Lewisburg, PA, catalog

1982

*Photo Start*, The Bronx  
Museum, Bronx, NY, catalog;  
*Contemporary Photography  
as Phantasy*, The Santa  
Barbara Museum of Art,  
Santa Barbara, CA, catalog;  
*Figures: Forms and  
Expressions*, The Albright-  
Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

1981

*Lichtbildnisse*, Rheinisches  
Landesmuseum,  
Bonn, W. Germany, book;  
*Photo*, Metro Pictures, NYC, NY;  
*The Markers*, San Francisco  
Museum of Modern Art, San  
Francisco, CA, catalog;  
*Points of Departure*, Barbara  
Gladstone Gallery, NYC, NY

1980

*Painterly Photographs*,  
Washington Project for the  
Arts, Washington, D.C.,  
catalog and circulated

1979

*Altered Photographs*,  
P.S.1/Center for Urban  
Resources, Long Island City, NY

1978

*Ellen Carey, Larry Williams,  
Marcia Resnick*, Chicago  
Center for Contemporary  
Photography, Chicago, IL;  
*The Grotesque in  
Photography*, Neikrug Gallery,  
NYC, NY, book

1977

*In Western New York*,  
Albright-Knox Gallery,  
Buffalo, NY, catalog

1976

*Ellen Carey - Cindy Sherman:  
Photo Bus Show*, CEPA and  
Niagara Frontier Transit  
System, Buffalo, NY;  
*Recent Portraiture*, Renaissance  
Society of University of  
Chicago, Chicago, IL

1975

*Subject Women*, Spencer  
Museum of Art, University of  
Lawrence, Lawrence, KS

### GRANTS:

Coffin Grant, University of  
Hartford, CT, 1986, 1990, 1991

Polaroid 20" x 24", Polaroid  
Corporation, Boston, MA and  
NYC, NY, 1984-1992

Massachusetts Council on  
the Arts, New Works Grant,  
Boston, MA, 1986

New York State Federation  
for Artists Grant (FFA),  
NYC, NY, 1986

National Endowment  
for the Arts (NEA),  
Washington, D.C., 1984

Lightworks, Syracuse, NY, 1980

Creative Artists Public Service  
(CAPS), New York, NY, 1979

### COMMISSIONS

Madison Square Garden,  
Executive Headquarters,  
NYC, NY, 7 Lightboxes





Abstract No. 8, 1991 (detail)

## COLLECTIONS:

### *Museums*

Albright-Knox Art Gallery,  
Buffalo, NY;  
Brooklyn Museum of Art,  
Brooklyn, NY;  
Chicago Art Institute,  
Chicago, IL;  
Dallas-Fort Worth Art  
Museum, Texas;  
Fogg Museum, Harvard  
University, Cambridge, MA;  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
NYC, NY;  
Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston, TX;  
Nelson-Atkins Museum,  
Kansas City Art Institute,  
Kansas City, MO;  
Pieker Art Gallery, Colgate  
University, Hamilton, NY;  
University Art Museum, UNM,  
Albuquerque, NM;  
Wadsworth Atheneum,  
Hartford, CT

### *Corporations, Foundations*

Bell Atlantic, Arlington, VA;  
Chase Manhattan Bank,  
NYC, NY;  
CocaCola Corporation,  
Atlanta, GA;  
Dannheiser Foundation,  
NYC, NY;  
First Bank of Minneapolis,  
Minneapolis, MN;  
First National Bank of  
Chicago, IL;  
International  
Polaroid Corporation,  
Cambridge, MA;  
Lightworks, Syracuse, NY;  
Marine Midland Bank,  
NYC, NY;  
Patrick Lannan Foundation,  
Palm Beach, FL;  
Ponderosa Collection,  
Cincinnati, OH;  
Progressive Insurance  
Company, Cleveland, OH;  
Reader's Digest,  
Pleasantville, NY;  
Rich's Products, Inc.,  
Buffalo, NY;  
Ruttenberg Foundation,  
Chicago, IL

## EDUCATION:

### 1978

M.F.A., State University of  
New York at Buffalo, Buffalo

### 1975

B.F.A., Kansas City Art  
Institute, Kansas City, MO

### 1970

Art Students' League,  
NYC, NY

Born: NYC, NY

Lives/Works: NYC, NY and  
Hartford, CT

The artist is an Associate  
Professor at the Hartford Art  
School, University of Hartford.

Ellen Carey is represented  
by the Jayne H. Baum  
Gallery, New York City.

Ellen Carey wishes to give  
special thanks to John  
Reuter, Director of the  
Polaroid 20x24 Studio,  
whose invaluable assistance  
helped her to realize the  
work in this exhibition.

This exhibition is presented  
by Arts in the Academy, a  
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National Academy of  
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Avenue, NW, Washington,  
DC 20418. For information:  
Fredrica W. Wechsler,  
Director.

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Christopher Passchl,  
Wondriska Associates

*Generous support for  
the exhibition was  
provided by the Polaroid  
Corporation.*



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