

afterimage

THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM



SPECIAL ISSUE
PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ARCHIVE

VOL. 35, NO. 3



USA \$5.50/CAN \$7.50

THE STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SELLE COLLECTION OF STREET VENDOR PHOTOGRAPHS

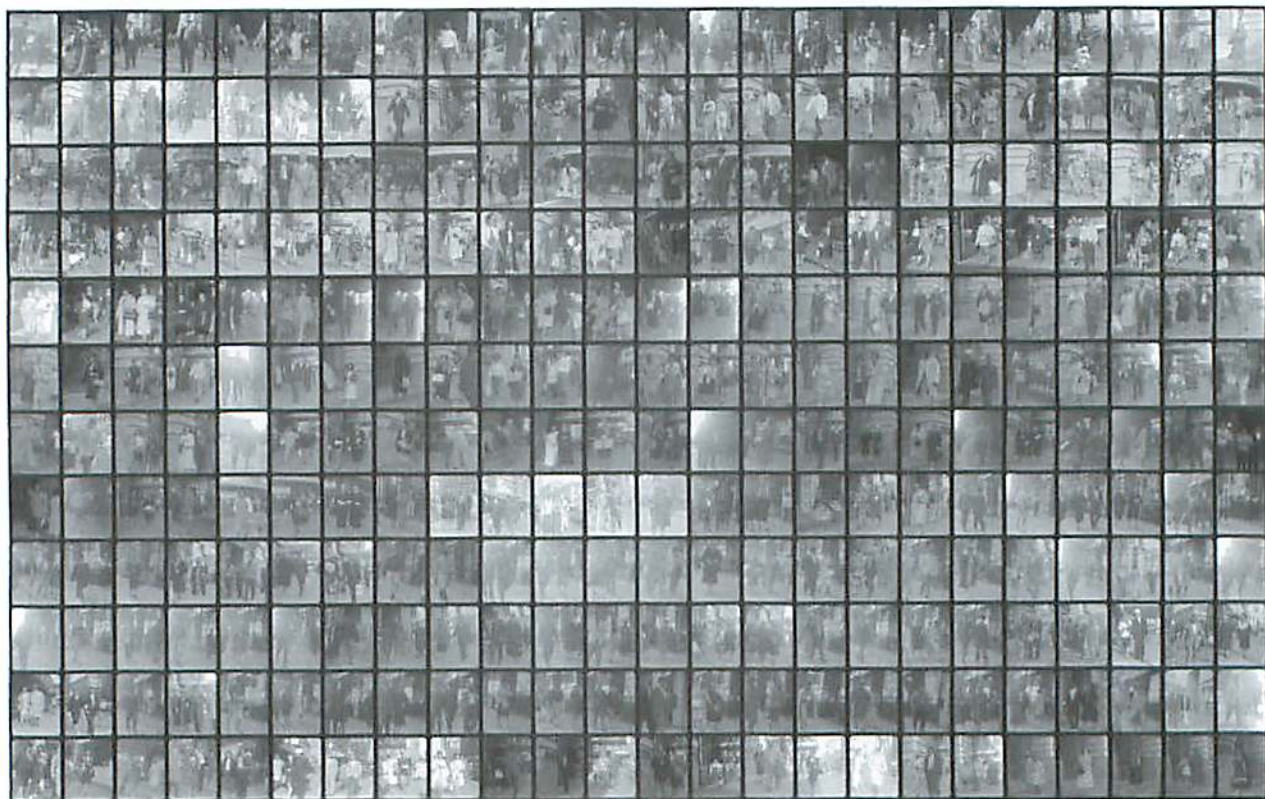
We frequently come to know archives through the weight of their sheer number in mass, which quantifies and qualifies their origins, ability, and options for future interpretation. These cumulative possibilities normally make up an archive's "story." Many archival reclamation projects are bent upon telling this story (such as the 2006 DVD collection and book, *Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection*¹), but the archive that is the focus of this essay involves a number of pictures that defy regular narratives. The Joseph Selle Collection at the Visual Studies Workshop, with over one million negatives of street vendor photographs, defies regular narration through its sheer magnitude of numbers and invites speculation about a different category of archive: the dual act of storytelling and counting.

This hybrid status may lie beyond the types of picture archives and their corresponding patterns evocatively proposed by the late historian and archivist Paul Vanderbilt. Responsible for modernizing major picture repositories such as the Picture Division of the Library of Congress, Vanderbilt opened the eyes of a new generation of historians and picture researchers to the interpretive possibilities of these resources. Vanderbilt listed four principal types of collections: 1) trade agencies; 2) working files of particular serial publications or promotional agencies; 3) critical collections of outstanding specimens (such as museum collections); and 4) repositories devoted to preservation as such.² This last category offered the most far-reaching

possibilities for Vanderbilt as they were based on the contingencies of future development.

These future contingencies invited the use of archives as an exploration rather than the routine selection of illustrations to accompany prescribed arguments. To encourage an open-ended, imaginative use of pictures, Vanderbilt worked out a long-term practice of forming combinations of images, usually in pairs, that were unrelated to each other by the usual archival categories of photographer, time period, geographic location, genre, and subject matter. Escaping the regulation of narrow control vocabularies, the pairings would reveal an unexpected line of interpretation and lead to larger associative patterns of imagery and ideas. Vanderbilt put his theories into practice over much of his career by posting combinations of unrelated pictures. These informal, reading-room "exhibitions" stimulated the imagination and encouraged conversations with like-minded visual researchers.

The key to these stimulating possibilities was the large number of pictures associated with this final type of image repository, posing unexpected and revealing juxtapositions and linkages. Another insightful historian and picture researcher, David Nye, drew on this potential with the photographic archive of General Electric.³ There, Nye found a system of relationships between constituent elements of



the corporation and its ideology that were only visible in the archive taken as a whole. Pictures directed toward consumers and management interrelated with those made for workers and the engineers. These various facets of the corporation only reveal themselves when the archive is apprehended systematically and within the current of many images rather than the single outstanding one.

Similarly, the key to unlocking the value of the Selle Collection lies in the *many* rather than the *one*, but this collection carries a multitude that sets it apart from Vanderbilt's institutional "preservation archive" or Nye's corporate "image world." The one million-plus images in the Selle collection are the product of a specialized small business in San Francisco, Fox Movie Flash, engaged in the bygone pictorial practice of street vendor photography. As such, the plethora of pictures belong to one overriding set, as diverse as they may be within that type. Since the pictures were all taken with a specially modified motion picture camera and stored on 100-foot rolls, the standard half-frame negatives are readily digitized using standard motion picture, post-production scanning equipment. This capacity for digitization animates much of the potential of this new type of archive and made possible the exploratory projects that ensued with the Selle Collection at the Visual Studies Workshop (VSW, publisher of *Afterimage*) in Rochester, New York.

My purpose with this article is to recount these projects—both in the sense of telling the story of and assessing the impact of numbers and the digitization of images—and to speculate on further project possibilities with special archives of this kind. The projects are Andy Eskind's groundbreaking initial work with the collection that established the basis for David Mount's video *17532 Pictures* (2005) and Elisabeth Tonnard's artist's book, *Two of Us: Encounters* (2007). Each artist worked with the same set of images (about 18,000 digital images scanned as a pilot project). While each work bears its separate identity and provocative meanings, they share an overriding ambition "to verge on something else" that stems from the intractability of very large numbers. There is an instability and questioning that causes each artist/researcher to direct their project and seek meanings outside of regular boundaries. These experimental projects point out that archives of very large numbers operate as a kind of new math—an entirely different logic causing archival work to "verge" on boundary-testing genres and hybrid "artistic acts."

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

As mentioned, if there is a story here to recount at all, it is thanks to Eskind's rediscovery of the collection in the spring and summer of 2003. Until then, there was little documentation of the collection: it scarcely had a name (the "Selle Collection" is still somewhat provisional). With over thirty years experience pioneering image databases at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, Eskind quickly saw the possibilities. He immediately set to work to recount the collection (in both senses) and to find out what it consisted of and where it came from. The numerical counting part was easy: just a matter of multiplying the 1,500 frames on each 100 foot roll by the number of rolls in each drawer, multiplied again by the number of drawers (1,500 images x 100 rolls x 7 drawers = 1,050,000 images total). If this calculation is not exact, even a casual survey of the collection would indicate that we are dealing with a hell of a lot of images here.

Learning the history of the collection was trickier and started from anecdotes about its origins provided to Eskind by the former coordinator of the VSW Research Center, William S. Johnson, and the founder and former director of VSW, Nathan Lyons. Though still somewhat sketchy, it appears that it was donated to VSW in the mid-1970s by a recent graduate of its MFA program, Brent Sikkema. He rescued the rolls of negatives after the collapse of Joseph Selle's company, Fox Movie Flash. As with other collections of images at VSW, this storehouse of negatives was not purchased according to a formal collections policy but "saved from the dumpster" because VSW possessed both the raw storage space and a keen receptiveness to the value of visual culture and vernacular images.

Eskind built on this account of the collection with clever detective work. He conducted background research into Fox Movie Flash and found it was in operation at 942 Market Street in San Francisco from the 1930s to the 1970s. He searched records about the proprietor and his next of kin. He located and interviewed the last living camera operator, Joe Reston, and learned some telling anecdotes of the life and craft of the street vendor photography business. Amazingly, Eskind discovered and purchased on eBay at least four of the surviving specimens of the modified DeVries

motion picture cameras, the very cameras used by the Fox Movie Flash team. These cameras are a remarkable story of folksy photographic ingenuity. They appear bricolage-like as a whimsical assemblage of converted and merged equipment parts: a basic 35mm motion picture camera hacked with a modified shutter and flopped on its side. On top, a viewfinder sticks out and doubles as a platform for advertisement samples. Below protrudes a ticket dispenser. The street operators would bear these odd photographic rigs with harnesses that made them look like optical accordion players. Along with these finds came other accoutrements of the trade such as sample vintage prints and miscellaneous trade advertisements.

FACING PAGE

Composite image of photographs from the Selle Collection at Visual Studies Workshop

ABOVE

Photograph from the Selle Collection at Visual Studies Workshop



Equally interesting was the information that was discovered within the rolls with a little more detective work. The rolls contain numerical markings, though an exact chronological sequence of the images and rolls is still elusive. Beyond the interpretation of frame numbers and markings, there were attempts to “crack the code” of the material frame itself by inspecting minute irregularities around the negative edge and the potentially matching frame of the film gate. Eskind invited in a retired engineer from Kodak, who had worked on the famous Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination case, to consult on the investigation. Eskind also engaged other experts through listservs to find useful information within the pictures themselves. For example, film buffs found they could date particular images to the month by discerning in the background the title of movies on theater marquees. But as revealing as such embedded details might have been, the “collective view” enabled by the digitization of the images has generated even more avenues of interest.

As mentioned, Eskind’s eye was immediately struck by the digitization-ready disposition of the archive: 35mm film that could be run through a standard high-resolution scanner. He received funding from the late Irv Shankman of St. Louis that enabled him to send twelve rolls to Postworks in New York City. Finding a day that the technicians could work on such a special project, Eskind hand-delivered the material and came back to Rochester with a 80 GB firewire drive full of just under 18,000 tiff and jpeg digital image files.

These digitized images unleashed the fury of the archive’s numbers and established the basis of creative projects that were to follow. Initially, it was a matter of taming the raw image data on the large drives by image processing: converting them into more manageable grayscale jpegs, renaming and ordering them into directories. Processing the image data evolved into discovering ways to view the images either singly or in groups through lists and grids. Brief sequences of images set the single images in motion in looped animations and anticipated future experimental work.

This early stage of collection assessment, research, and digitization culminated in the first public exhibition at the Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis, organized by Eskind and curator Renny Pritikin. Titled “Joseph Selle’s Fox Movie Flash: Mid-Century Street Vendor Photography,” the exhibition assembled and exposed the tensions between varying uses and interpretations of this numerous material.⁴ On one hand, the show opened a window on the collection with a unique view of vernacular visual history. Like a time machine it sampled fleeting moments of San Francisco street life with pedestrians caught in passing on the sidewalk. Collectively, the show offered a compressed view of the changing times of urban life through changing fashions and guises of the decades following World War II, suggesting questions about the social functions of street vendor photography itself and its operators. Were Selle and his associate photographers like the “public characters” defined by urbanologist Jane Jacobs as regulars of the street who in various ways both stabilized street life and revitalized it?⁵ Such questions of social position remain an open part of the Selle Collection’s story. On the other hand, the show grappled with the aesthetic similarities between the Fox Movie Flash images and the modernist street photography

of Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and others. Both Eskind and Pritikin eloquently pinpointed their attraction to the material through these modernist canons, yet openly questioned their own aesthetic responses and curatorial decisions in view of other options for apprehending the archive as visual culture.

For both organizers, the underlying reality of large numbers disturbed the matter and prevented the collection from settling into an established pattern of use and interpretation as social history or aesthetic experience. From the onset, Eskind’s questions and sense of dilemma revolved around the numbers involved. “How long does it take to look at a million photographs? Is it even possible?” As if trying to fathom such numbers, he goes on to speculate on the number of images we are exposed to each day in a media saturated society (He mentions 1,500 images today, which is entirely credible given the factoid that 2,700 photographs are taken every second worldwide⁶). Eskind closes this meditation on numbers with the further speculation that the “conceptual conundrum” posed by the inconceivable scale was the daunting factor that deterred researchers from previously using the collection and that kept it dormant for so long. Yet, paradoxically, rather than a deterrent, the power of large numbers seems to be the very element of fascination that draws his continued interest and drives the inquiry to other levels of cultural and aesthetic meaning.

Seeing the large numbers as some kind of unbounded possibility space, Eskind wondered what other “imagined points of interest” might be dormant in this “vast documentary record” and how other selections would compare to the curatorial decisions made by Pritikin. Pritikin admitted his unease in selecting some images for release, “like genies in a bottle,” and leaving others to “recede back into obscurity forever.” But, as we shall see, the show indeed released genies from the multitudes that would not be put back into the bottle.

17523 PICTURES

Another consequential force released by the UC Davis exhibition was an experimental video animation by Mount that opened up the next phase of creative work with the collection. Then a graduate student in the MFA program at VSW, Mount was introduced to the Selle project through Eskind’s course, Working with Visual Information. Mount was immediately enthralled by the project and continued work as Eskind’s assistant throughout the year, absorbing much of his expertise and method of inquiry into archives. Mount certainly developed his own individual perspectives on the elusive meanings of these numerous pictures along the way. At the culminating point of the UC Davis show, Mount had completed his unique video work *17523 Pictures*, which captured and distilled the most radical elements of the show. The piece is the result of a deceptively simple procedure with far-reaching conceptual and perceptual consequences. After a painstaking adjustment of each and every frame of the digitized image base, Mount compiled and edited the entire set into an animated video running for ten minutes at thirty frames per second. Its visual effect is explosive as the mind reels to assimilate the racing medley of street figures and images. Along with the perceptual impact, the conceptual dissonance with other guiding assumptions of the show stands in high relief. Much of Eskind’s and Pritikin’s wonderment revolved round questions of selectivity, but *17523 Pictures* works with

the entire digitized set excluding nothing except the header frames and the occasional blank shot. Dispensing with the intentionality and aesthetics of selection altogether, Mount made the more radical decision “to run with the numbers.”

The consequences spilled over into a new basis for seeing pictures and visualizing large number picture archives, marking a juncture where Mount’s work departs from Eskind and Priitkin’s gallery-based framework of investigation. Eskind, too, was absorbed by the potential of the randomly running numbers but sought aesthetic salvation in the occasional singular image that stood out from the rest by some special signifying feature. Eskind, borrowing a phrase from a UC Davis professor, Jay Mechling, labeled the phenomenon “intermittent reward” to explain how one could spend minutes looking through many reels of unedited dross as long as one gained an occasional prize, a pleasing surprise in the midst of predictable banality. As valid as this principle of discovery might be for working with archives, Mount’s *17523 Pictures* unleashes the perceptual fury of the entire set rather than the individual that surprises us. It is the paradoxically “untotalizable” pattern of the whole that emerges as the intermittent reward of the piece, whereby scores of “unsynched” images are run through the projector and are melded together provisionally by a strained persistence of vision. The jumping images collide with each other according to their differences, yet they are similar enough that patterns of movement, time, and space appear in glimmers that are their own reward. The sight of the frames running can conjure a time machine compressing days and months of times into a flash of recognition. Emphatically, these patterns are tenuous visualizations of the very large numbers involved—the archive itself—and not an artifact of any singular frame.

Leading up to and following the UC Davis show, Mount’s piece has provoked an interesting range of viewer responses that suggest how powerful the visualization of a large image base might be. Before exhibiting the work, Mount “preflighted” it during the semester-end graduate critiques. After minutes of astonishment in the group, one graduate student raised a telling concern that he was “worried about what such films might do to us.” The student seemed to be pointing to the cumulative effect of faster and faster configurations of animated imagery that strained the perceptual capacity to make sense of experience. The worry connects to well-known developments in media culture concerning the speeding up of editing clips, the shortening of “sound bites,” the growing deficit of attention in the swirl of accelerating stimuli. *17523 Pictures* does indeed encapsulate the changing nature of visual experience, but for Mount the project possess internal psychological consequences as well.

For Mount, the volatile effect of hundreds of rapidly flashing images extends past the eye and impinges on the workings of the brain—the screen images interfere in effect with mental images. Mount explicitly ties the perceptual experience of the work to the life of the mind in his statement for the next important public showing of work, the sixtieth “Rochester-Finger Lakes Exhibition” in the summer of 2005 where the work was awarded “Best of Show.” It states that important visual images “make the hop from short-lived, sensory memory to permanent, long-term memory. The vast majority of our visual perceptions are never retained.” Here, Mount invokes a

filtering process that combs the multitudes reminiscent of Eskind and Priitkin’s curatorial process of selecting out some images for permanent display and contemplation. Yet, as Mount internalizes the activity of selection within mental and perceptual processes, the analogy continues between the curatorial gallery and the mental theater when Mount states that, “among these experiences are the uncountable nameless faces we’ve passed but will never remember. Less than lost memories, they are memories that never formed.” Here again, the curator’s agony of throwing back selected images into the dark vault of the institutional archive is transferred to the theater of memory with an elegy, not for lost memories, but for memories that were never fully formed and exist only in potential.

It is the power of *17523 Pictures* to invoke this war between potential phenomena and their realization that escalate out of the tiny battles between the single and the numerous. The conflict suggests the enigmatic lapses of continuity between discrete, local occurrences and global trends subject to the laws of statistics. Arthur Koestler brought up this discontinuity as another feature of the “Janus” or double-faced character of hierarchical nature where every phenomena is a “holon”: both a part of larger whole and a system embracing small parts.⁷ For example, as phenomena are both erratic and rule-governed, according to which face one attends to, Koestler used information theorist Warren Weaver’s example of predicting the number of dog-biting incidents in a large city: statistics show with uncanny regularity that 76.5 people will be bitten by dogs each year, but no one can know in any actual encounter on the street whether a particular dog will bite. Similarly, we can never be certain which of the street figures in the flashing parade of *17523 Pictures* will bite in the sense of seizing our attention in a particular, sustained way. And yet, all is not lost “in the uncountable nameless faces” because memories are Janus-like, too, in the hierarchical play of the archival system. The individual pictures maintain their hold on chance even while forming predictable patterns of urban street movement visualized through the Selle collection.

In encountering the wobble of chance within the necessity of movement, *17523 Pictures* verges on cinema but, as with the other Selle projects, remains enough apart to complicate the very conditions of the medium or aesthetic approach. Of course, putting disparate frames together with a stills-in-motion technique is a familiar avant-garde strategy of such filmmakers as Bruce Connors and Peter Kubelka. But *17523 Pictures* appears even more elemental than structuralist films in retaining the rawness of a historical archive set “unnaturally” in motion. The rawness of proto-cinema, such as the early chronophotographic work of Eugene Marey, occurs at every stage. It forms a full circle between the actions of the original Selle operators hacking a motion picture camera to take still photographs and Mount’s stitching the stills back together to verge again on cinema. In the elliptical loops of *17523 Pictures*, the Selle collection becomes an archive of proto-cinematic contingencies that turns the double identity of stills-in-motion into a cipher of memory.

TWO OF US

These figures of circles of doubles bring the story of the Selle collection to yet another stage in the recent publication of Tonnard’s artist’s book, *Two of Us: Encounters*. A Dutch poet and visual artist,

Tonnard was introduced to the collection by Mount. After sucking in the dilemmas of working with a collection of this size, she evolved her own unique research methods and project ideas. Where Eskind and Pritikin made curatorial selections in a self-questioning way, Mount, in a radical move, included every digitized frame and thrust the process of selection upon the viewer, forcing connections between perceptual cinema and internal memory. In this most recent cycle, Tonnard introduces a principle of selection, based on type, that informs every facet of an artist's book bent on recounting the capacity of the collection to harbor one of the most penetrating figures of modernity, the double.

The form of the work also complements the previous cycles, in moving from exhibition to motion media to book. Materially, the book is straightforwardly designed and produced as a paperback (printed by LuLu) consisting of over 400 pages of reproduced frames from the digitized segment of the Selle collection. The text portions, such as the book's introduction and acknowledgments, are also conventional except for the layout of the poem, "Les Sept Viellards" by Charles Baudelaire, where the words are broken apart, set, and rotated progressively at a angle below each photograph. Flipping the pages causes the words to pirouette as the poem reads sequentially from front to back on the recto and, on the verso, from back to front. Whichever way, the book is a deceptively simple tale of the double recounted in image and number.

Even as the book is bound together pervasively by this image and type, the presence of any meaning or theme proves elusive on the level of the individual frame or picture—as in previous Selle projects. Couples appear together in the pictures as they walk on the streets of San Francisco, but are they really together? Or is the association just a projection and a perceptual linkage reinforced by the theme? Sometimes the pictures display strong evidence that the couples indeed belong together as they march along arm in arm, even in matching outfits. Sometimes accoutrements are at work making the match, such as similar sunglasses, corsages, or the angle at which their heads may be turned. But these linking details and outward signs might just as well be contingencies of the moment that depend as much on the viewer's perceptual disposition and the learned conventions of reading photographs. Even stranger cases arise when no linking feature exists whatsoever, yet somehow, certain figures seem paired as if by some hidden affinity. Whether real or fictitious, the act of walking in loosely born pairs seems fitting in the modern city of this post-World War II era, as fitting as military uniforms, baggy suits, furs, and white gloves.

What we see as a result of Tonnard's duplicitous selection principle seems to ferret out the unconscious forms of alignment in modernity as detected in street vendor photography. The linkages and alignments that form pairs seem as varied and important to understanding modern psychic life as the crowd was for Elias Canetti.⁸ He proposed that crowds came in two essential types, open and closed. Open crowds exist to grow and disintegrate when growth is no longer possible. Closed crowds accept limitations and rely on permanence and maintaining boundaries through inclusion and exclusion. However we look for these forms in Tonnard's book, the doubles that move together in these photographs seem to elude Canetti's typing.

The double possesses both a stability connected to binary pairings and oppositions, yet in view of the fluid conditions of the street, they appear unstable and destined for dissolution either by breaking apart into individuals or coalescing into larger groupings of the crowd. Curiously, Canetti never examines the double in his exhaustive study of the psychological forms and variations of the crowd. Perhaps the closest he comes is in his category of the Crystal Crowd, which, defined as small, rigid groups of men that serve to precipitate crowds, hints at a refractory starting point and multiplier.⁹ In this more open sense of crystallization, *Two of Us* cites the double, not the individual, as the core propagating agent of the vagaries of modern street life.

The pairs on the street become then just as much agents of division as they do units of social togetherness. A number of the Selle images selected by Tonnard comprise a catalog of internal variations that signal apartness rather than union. A sample listing of disturbing elements would include an odd character lurking in the background behind the couples; a compelling "negative space" in between, highlighting the separation of figures; an accidental alignment of arms or legs; mismatched clothes; a misalignment of the figures. These disturbing details serve to haunt the more reassuring signs of companionship and are charged with a kind of ambiguity that Sigmund Freud sought to explain in his essay on the "uncanny." Tonnard makes astute observations about this much-discussed idea as well as other important conceits about the impact of modernity on the psyche from such cultural critics and thinkers as Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Such theories of modernity are given a new twist in the context of the book. For example the solitariness of the *flâneur* is infused with new capricious meanings seen in the double vision of the Selle cameramen. In this way, *Two of Us* makes a thought-provoking contribution to a growing body of theoretical literature on the different status of the *flâneur* in contemporary culture, such as Ann Friedberg's *flâneuse*.¹⁰ This artist's book has the added merit of embedding theory performatively in the nuanced rhetoric of archival images.

This book-as-performance raises additional questions of how the images and the figures themselves perform throughout the text. Mostly they walk, of course, frozen in passing by the Fox Movie Flash cameraman. The cameraman himself performs, usually encountering them frontally with the camera. Some, like the photographers, perform by looking, others seem to play their role by being looked at. The street performance is a network of motions and looks at different tangents, encounters. The acts occur repetitiously, too, step by step, day after day. The cameraman always points the camera from the waist level, adding a sameness to the pictures' perspective. Despite the repetition and the channeling of movement along the sidewalk, the performers seem to act on their own accord. If fate governs the actions of the double, it is an unpredictable fate subject to interruption and variation. At important junctures in the book, there are special characters of special notice punctuating the equilibrium of the doubles. They are "third men," in the sense of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," who are silent, unseen partners in the modern journey. They may also appear similar to Edgar Allan Poe's Man of the Crowd, mysterious figures that embody the crowd in their alterity. Such figures are exemplified in *Two of Us* by a special picture—the frontispiece of the book reproduced twice—that depicts a woman whose strange action rivets our attention. She seems to be falling

down, her legs akimbo, offset at a sharp angle under her. Yet she looks straight into camera, seemingly as oblivious to her falling as her partner alongside her. This signature image epitomizes the standing of the double throughout the book, the double that is off-balance, somehow unknowingly falling.

This status of falling is not a peripheral issue but inscribed at the heart of the modern double as recounted by *Two of Us*. Being off-balance is part of its mathematics, its way of counting the multiplicity of urban modernity and, perhaps, enumerating the possibilities of very large archives too. Its peculiar mathematics comes down of the oddness of the number two. The very number that seems the epitome of parity and balance is off because it forever stands between values of singularity and multiplicity. Destabilized, the two plays one off the other in relation to the many. This oddness of two explains the mathematics of the tensions in the Selle collection encountered previously in the Eskind/Pritikin show and Mount's *17523 Pictures* and that *Two of Us* carries further.

Mathematics is especially relevant in recounting this tale of an archive if we follow the mathematician and novelist Rudy Rucker's explanation of number systems as relating to basic patterns of thought, sensation, and worldly conditions. In his 1987 book *Mind Tools*, Rucker summarizes levels of number systems that involve distinctly different quantities and intuitions about the world: small, medium, large, and inconceivable.¹¹ Beyond the small and medium numbers (which, like two, can have their own fascinating quirks), the large numbers require special conceptual tools and notational methods in order to think about them. In the 1930s, the mathematician Edward Kasner popularized the name "googol" for a fantastically large number that as Rucker calculates, "... if we could count up all the atoms in all the stars we can see, we would come up with less than googol of them."¹² And, hold your breath, googol is just the smallest measure of that inconceivable scale: numbers so large that they surpass the ability to describe them in terms shorter than the number itself. Without any workable notation, they are very difficult to think about. That googol, and the inconceivable numbers beyond, is not a vapid thought experiment and relates to real historical conditions is shown by the current symbolic value of "googol" in our postmodern world. As the source of the brand name of the Internet's most powerful search engine, it summons up the huge registers of data in our digital culture, a magnitude of information rhetorically expressed as bordering on the infinite.

On the scale of these fantastic numbers, the Selle collection, at just over one million items, hardly stacks up to even the medium category of numbers in Rucker's abstract math. But relative to archives and the kinds of objects under count—a picture being, in itself, an inexhaustible repository of information—a million is equivalent to googol standing at the threshold of the inconceivable in the world of pictures. In a similarly scaled down way, *Two of Us* presents a countable sequence of about 400, but the meaning of this number is amplified by the implied universe of images lying beyond. In the fabric of Tonnard's book, we sense that the doubles could go forever and those presented are only the tip of the iceberg. The infinite sea of possible pairs mocks the act of counting in that two marks the primary act of counting, as in the schoolyard jab, "you can hardly count to

two" (Does one even need counting?). Therefore, even the smallest, basic numbers possess quandaries of thought as *Two of Us* attests in linking the number two with the inconceivable. Moreover, the book builds on these mathematical quirks to link the number two with the persistent problematics of modernist metaphysics figured in the double.

Tonnard invokes these problematics explicitly in her introduction calling out the themes of incessant repetition in Baudelaire's vision of seeing the same "fiendish old man again and again in the streets." As mentioned, this image of perpetual repetition figures importantly in the fundamental theoretical texts of Freud's uncanny and Benjamin's commodity reproduction. But Tonnard's thoughts on repetition turn more on figures of temporality in concert with photography's complex relationship to



time. The double is doubly stuck in *Two of Us*: once by the internal mirroring of the couples reflecting each other, twice by the snap of the photographer's camera. Tonnard sees in this stuck time a kind of vacuum, but there is also a splitting that suggests Friedrich Nietzsche's meditations on splitting as interpreted by Alenka Zupancic. In her investigation of Nietzsche's "philosophy of the two," she proposes that modern time arises at the moment "when 'one turns to two,' namely as the very moment of a break or a split."¹³ The emblem of time born out of the double was the mid-day sun—noon—when the shadow is shortest and time seems to come to a stand still (One also thinks of the gun fight encounter in John Ford's 1952 film *High Noon*). Noon is the peak moment of ambiguity that symbolizes the truth that every moment is doubled in modern life.

Two of Us similarly unwinds according to this Nietzschean figuration of the double as a condensed kind of time loop. The pages when flipped quickly set Baudelaire's words in circular motion, as they loop through the book as a whole front-to-back and back-to-front. The words that appear straight up and down at the book's center—"old" and "have"—would both be "noon" within the compass of the book. The frontispiece is doubled, capturing twice the falling women, an action at its peak, like noon. As in Fox Talbot's plate in *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), clocks, and all manner of devices for telling time, appear as unconscious timepieces that mirror photography's fixing of specific

ABOVE

Photograph from the Selle Collection at Visual Studies Workshop

moments (recall Eskind's focus on movie marquees as temporal points of reference). There are evidently many times of day represented in the Selle pictures, even night pictures illuminated by flash photography. On sunny days the figures cast shadows that, like primitive gnomons, may indicate the time of day by the length and angle of the shadow. Whatever time is inscribed, as a clock, *Two of Us* is always set at noon. Like modern times, the doubles it draws from the Selle archive foreshadow a present, from the past, that never quite arrives.

In projecting the modern image of time as doubled, *Two of Us* works with the capacity of a very large picture collection to make photography converge with cinema. Going further, the book finds its richest implications for discovering interrelationships between time, media, and textuality in steering these media toward literature: to verge on, if not quite converge with literary production. In line with the Nietzschean dynamics of noon sketched above, the distinction of approaching or veering closely toward but never quite arriving is important to maintain. Tonnard's image-text verges on literature but retains a critical degree of separation and alterity in visual culture. Like the previous works with the Selle collection, *Two of Us* is a hybrid that subjects medium and genre boundaries to the test. The book's hybridity is manifest materially: it is designed and printed like a novel with standard paperback cover, perfect binding, bonded paper, and, at about four hundred pages—all common features for a literary work. The look and feel of a novel encourages one to “read” the pictures as a text. And given the indexical power of photography to link to the real world, the textuality carries over to its subject matter: doubles on city streets. Tonnard explicitly encourages this textual interchange between the book, images, and the modern world in declaring, “Transformed by photography, the streets have become a text. One wonders who could be their author.” She goes on to locate the agent of this hybrid textuality in repetition, the effects of the archive itself operating at a large scale of numbers. The message is scattered across the huge archive but raises penetrating questions about how literature can express the multiplicity of visual culture. The implied answer is that literature must itself arrive at a functional hybridity in order to interface with the modern conditions of visual culture and media.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE PROJECTS

Each of these three experimental projects with the Selle collection shows that encounters with very large picture collections give rise to special hybrid forms while positions, perceptions, and interpretations wobble under the force of huge numbers of images. Andy Eskind and Renny Pritikin's exhibition drew from the Selle collection as a storehouse of vernacular images that unconsciously and problematically verged on the aesthetics of modernist street photography. David Mount, in running with the numbers, arrived at a form of proto-cinema that inverted the struggle with selection from the outside to the internal theatre of perception and memory. Elisabeth Tonnard crafted a work of visual literature that caused time to stand still in a repetitive encounter with the most perplexing figure of modernity: the double. In so doing, each artist had to learn to count and recount the story of an archive in new way. For Eskind and Pritikin, the story turned around the elusive “one” within the proverbial haystack. Mount assimilated nothing less than the “all” that bordered on the infinite (every digitized picture that he had access to). Tonnard fixed upon the “two,” a type as well as a number, which in an uncanny way mediates

between the one and the all (the inconceivable multitude).

So, what is left to do with the Selle collection? What other numbers might act a generator of hybrid forms from this extraordinary repository of images? One possibility is already under discussion by the Selle Circle—an informal alliance of Eskind, Mount, Tonnard, and myself dedicated to fostering research and projects with this collection. It is to create a gigantic mural in the form of a printed matrix of every one of the set of over one million images. At 2 x 3 inches each, the composite image would stand over 125 feet tall by 333 feet wide. Even with today's powerful large-scale printing technologies, this poses a Herculean task of image digitization, processing, and graphic output—and that does not include the challenges of site selection, promotion, governmental clearances, and the fundraising that would be necessary to realize the project publicly. But overcoming these challenges would yield an extraordinary work of urban art with San Francisco being the most likely candidate as the host city.

In this vision, the Fox Movie Flash archive would once again return to the streets of San Francisco where the pictures could be surveyed individually (with binoculars, perhaps) or taken in panoramically. As a whole, patterns would emerge throughout the matrix that could not be perceivable in any other way. Decades of street life of a major city would be compressed spatially into one city block. Contemporary passers-by would be able to report on individual sightings on a Web site that would dynamically reproduce the composite mural using zoom imaging and web delivery technology. These sightings might lead to the identification of a friend or family member, a celebrity such as Marilyn Monroe perhaps, or other enigmatic figures of the modern life including the double. Whether street photography, perceptual cinema or deconstructive literature, this unique mural and public archive would enable the extensive possibilities of a very large picture collection to unwind for many years to come.

CHRISTOPHER BURNETT, former director of the Visual Studies Workshop, is currently an associate professor at the Center for the Visual Arts, University of Toledo, Ohio.

NOTES 1. Vanessa Toulmin, Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection (London: BFI Publishing, 2006). For a parallel story related to the Selle collection, see Stephen Farley and Regina Kelly, Snapped on the Street: A Community Archive of Photos and Memories from Downtown Tucson 1937–1963 (Tucson: Tucson Voices Press, 1999). 2. Paul Vanderbilt, “On Photographic Archives,” Afterimage Vol. 4, no. 3 (Sept. 1976), 8–13. 3. David E. Nye, Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890–1930 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). 4. Andrew Eskind and Renny Pritikin, Joseph Selle's Fox Movie Flash: Mid-Century Street Vendor Photography (Davis, CA: Richard L. Nelson Gallery, UC Davis, 2005). 5. Mitchell Daneser, Sidewalk (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 6. 6. See the Web site “How Much Information?” at www2.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info/film.html (accessed August 26, 2007). 7. Arthur Koestler, Janus: A Summing Up (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). 8. Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power, Carol Stewart, trans. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973). 9. Ibid., 73. 10. Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). 11. Rudy Rucker, Mind Tools: The Five Levels of Mathematical Reality (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987). 12. Ibid., 79–80. 13. Alenka Župančič, The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two (Boston: MIT Press, 2003), 25.