## Untitled, 1982



Arthur Ollman calls his new color photographs "short movies." Because he keeps the shutter open for as long as ten seconds, the sense of time passing is a salient feature of the series. Ghosts of figures, blurred by movement, occupy chairs, move through rooms, and engage in conversations in lavish San Francisco hotel lobbies and Parisian cafes. Although people play an important role, they are portrayed not as individuals but as anonymous participants in a small drama. Ollman's earlier color photographs, taken outdoors at night, and usually in the city, were always devoid of people. If a figure did happen to pass before the lens (exposures were as long as ten minutes to compensate for the near darkness), there was insufficient illumination for them to be recorded on the film.

Ollman is one of several photographers in the forefront of contemporary color photography. Others include William Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz on the East Coast, and Richard Misrach and Leland Rice in California. Color photographers differ widely in the way they use color. In his Cape Light series, Meyerowitz uses soft color poetically to capture the mood of tranquil summer days in Cape Cod. Rice's structural use of color reinforces the formal concern of his studio interior series. In his new works, Ollman uses color expressively, but with restraint, allowing the often garish subject-matter to speak for itself.

Ollman was a pioneer in the field of night color work, an approach that soon attracted

Bay Area photographers Steve Fitch and Richard Misrach. In Ollman's night photographs, the camera makes visible what the eye cannot see in darkness. Using only available light (sodium vapor street lights, incandescent automobile headlights), Ollman revealed unexpected hues produced by night sources of illumination -purple and green sand, pink and yellow shadows. These strange colors lend an air of unreality to the night works that is further intensified by the exaggerated perspective resulting from Ollman's use of a wide-angle lens (required for depth-of-field with a wide aperture).

Typically, Ollman exploits aspects of the medium most photographers attempt to minimize, such as distortion. Similarly, Ollman uses to his advantage the breaking up of the color into tiny dots of primary hues that occurs in a 20-by-24-inch enlargement from a 35 mm negative. The resultant mottled surface is reminiscent of pointillist painting or the spray-painted canvases of Jules Olitski. Indeed, contrary to what one might expect, earlier examples of color photography, such as those by Harry Callahan, Helen Levitt (MATRIX 47) and Paul Outerbridge, had less influence on current color work than did painting, color snapshots and media photography.

Although modern color film
has been available since 1936,
most so-called serious
photography continued to be
in black and white.
Noncommercial photographers
considered color photography
"vulgar," to use Walker
Evans's term. Resistance to
color was in part caused by
the difficulty in balancing

color with the other elements in the photograph, especially since most color film produces an exaggeration of hue. As John Szarkowski, head of the photography department at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, has noted, the camera's unique ability to "see" everything raises the question, "How much of the camera's miraculous descriptive power is the photographer capable of handling?" Moreover, color was the domain of advertizing photographers (who tend to maximize color saturation to call attention to their products); noncommercial photographers, until recently unsure of their status in the art world, wanted to distance themselves from commercialism. Even Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, highly successful fashion photographers who are expert at handling color, choose to exhibit their black-and-white work in museums and galleries.

By the 1970s, however, several young photographers felt that to remain within the confines of black-andwhite imagery was to be forced to retread paths already well-covered by others. Working in color represented an opening up of the medium to new explorations and discoveries. Ironically, the acceptance of color photography by the fine art world might have been facilitated by the popularity of photorealist painting, for which color photographs served as models.

In some ways, Ollman's hotel and cafe series recalls the work of the Hungarian-French photographer Brassaï, who recorded bohemian life of the 1930s in the dark bistros of Paris. Ollman was also

influenced by the loose, improvisational style of Jerry Burchard's black-andwhite photographs taken at night with long exposures in San Francisco's North Beach district. Ollman presents the viewer with evocative incidents that take place in a particular milieu. As critic John Berger notes, photographs, as "quotations from reality," do not lie. Their meaning, however, is highly dependent on context. Ollman's dramas are necessarily ambiguous, but they speak in a general way of the loneliness of the transient's environment and of decor that is a vainly nostalgic attempt to revive the opulence of an earlier age.

Ollman was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1947. He received a B.A. in Art History from the University of Wisconsin and an M.F.A. in Photography from Lone Mountain College in San Francisco. He received a First Award at California Expo in 1978 and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1979. Ollman left the Bay Area in 1984 to become the first director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

12 untitled Ektacolor photographs, 20" x 24", 1981, 1982, 1984.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

David Barnett Gallery,
Milwaukee, WI, '69;
Washington Project for the
Arts, Washington, DC, '78;
Grapestake Gallery, S.F.,
'79; Centre Georges Pompidou,
Musée National d'Art et de
Culture, Paris, '79;
Photograph Gallery, NY, '81;
Otis-Parsons Gallery, L.A.,
'84.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960, '78 (traveled, catalogue); Milwaukee Museum of Art, WI, Color: A Spectrum of Recent Color Photography, '79, catalogue; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA, Attitudes: American Photography in the 1970s, '79, catalogue; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennial, '81, catalogue; George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, Color as Form, '82, catalogue; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Photography in California 1945-1980, '84 (traveled, catalogue).

McDarrah. "Arthur Ollman," The Village Voice, January 30, '78.

Fischer, Hal.
"Reviews," Artforum, Feb.

Galvin, Susan. "Arthur Ollman's True San Francisco," San Francisco Magazine, July '79.

Edwards, Owen. "The Eighties: Decade of Another Color," Saturday Review, May 12, '79.

Alinder, James. 9 Critics 9 Photographers (Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1980).

MacAdams, Lewis.
"Southern Exposures,"
California Magazine, Jan.
'84.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

Selected bibliogaphy about the artist (see also catalogues under group exhibitions):

Things Artists Don't
Overlook, San Francisco
Chronicle, Dec. 11, '78.

Murray, Joan. "Piercing
the Dark," Artweek (Oakland,
CA), Dec. 16, '78.