

## CITIZEN GILBERT

THIS IS NOT A RENAISSANCE, AND GERRY GILBERT IS NOT A renaissance man. For the purposes of this argument, and because we live in an age when to resist specialization is to hazard the seriousness of one's reception, we will call Gilbert a poet. Given that, it would seem appropriate to try to discuss his activities as photographer, film-maker, radio host, etc. from within an aesthetic that his poetry proposes. But just what is articulated when we apply the term "poet" to the host of Gilbert's imaginative engagements is difficult enough to know; turning to the poetry itself we are struck again and again by a complex set of formal relationships with almost every other kind of expressive activity. Here is Gilbert, characteristically "riding the dog" in a poem from *MOBY JANE*:

### landscape

the LiTTLE hand between 4 & 5 and the bIg hand at 6  
 Calgary 63 km  
 the fields look wet  
 the sky looks blue  
 a tiny hairstroke of mud on the window  
 times 1000s and 1000s of blades of grass  
 I'm as near as a mirror to the finely drawn brows of the eyes  
 asleep beside me  
 the last edge of old snow looks like a month ago  
 the roof & wall panels in the bus are cut from marble  
 everyone sitting around in all the talking  
 clutching purses  
 pursing lips  
 we all realize  
 we're all real eyes<sup>1</sup>

The "landscape" of this poem is fluid, neither perspectively fixed nor spatially organised, moving instead through a syntactic montage of freeze frames (*the fields look wet/the sky looks blue*) until the narrator appears (*I'm as near as a mirror . . .*) sharply disclosed to his own gaze as the camera eye moves from exterior to interior. This begins a series of clearly cinematic apprehensions; of the person seated next to the narrator, the "edge of old snow", the bus's faux marble panelling, the murmured conversations of his fellow passengers. It could almost be a shooting script, and it is only the punning as of end rhymes (*clutching purses/pursing lips/we all realize/we're all real eyes*) that ultimately reveal this poem for the sonnet, for the literary artefact that it is.

Here is another sonnet, from *AZURE BLUES*:

eyes stung closed  
 balls kicked  
 nose batted  
 face muskegged  
 hands strapped & bitten  
 ass thrashed  
 teeth drilled  
 arm broken

What passed for poetic discourse in this period is perhaps best exemplified by the magazine *No Money From the Government*, whose name pretty much defined the limits of its aesthetic. The shrill and prescriptive new-marxism of its editor, Brian Fawcett, found little of consequence in the "journal entries" of Gilbert's utopian engagement. But it is perhaps salutary at this point in history to compare the several transformations that Fawcett has been required to undergo as a writer since the seventies, forever threatening to recede in the wake of the latest sociopolitical trend, to Gilbert's steady accumulation in the face of occasional indifference and unfashionability.

Overall, this was for Gilbert a period, if not of retreat, of retrenchment and reassessment. A rich legacy of seventies culture is its invention of "the sixties", a straw decade against which it could take the measure of its paralysis, in whose shortcomings it could trace the roots of its own unease and failure. It is difficult now to remember the viciousness of the *ad hominem* attacks on the sixties (their profligacy, sexism, disdain for technique, etc.) that were in those days the inflexible conversational mainstays of otherwise polite gatherings.

As a man who came of artistic age in the 1960s, Gilbert must surely have been on the receiving end of such attacks, which, even though they defined their own milieu more revealingly than the one they attempted to deconstruct, must still have hipchecked even someone of Gilbert's vaunted resilience into a state of reflective melancholy. For whatever reasons, as the next decade opens, and with it the grim ascendancies of Reagan and Restraint, Gilbert is prepared.<sup>6</sup> His poems have expanded their frames of reference, the puns and non-sequiters begin to signify far beyond themselves, their accumulation begins to act as a fact within itself. Other activities, though still pursued, move of necessity into the background. Gilbert enters the charged atmosphere of the early eighties holding his own, turning out reams of verse for every imaginable occasion; living up to the responsibilities of being both a fixture on the scene and a puckish troublemaker.

As the eighties progressed, two events precipitated a shift in the ground of Gilbert's reputation. The "Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983" show at the new Vancouver Art Gallery, a massive and assertive recapitulation of fifty years of the city's artistic legacy, showed a two hour excerpt from Gilbert's twenty-four hour self-titled movie. In the exhibition's phone-book sized catalogue Gilbert's name also cropped up frequently, his place in Vancouver art history contextualized in a way that threw new light on his troubled relationship with the local strain of literary postmodernism.

In Scott Watson's interview with Donna Balma about the Vancouver students of the English potter Bernard Leach, Gilbert is placed at the potter's English studios in 1959 "... gathering material, talking with Bernard and the other artists. He was going to become a poet, a writer."<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this encounter on the subsequent arc of Gilbert's life in art. Bernard Leach was one of the very small handful of western artists who made a truly serious study of the oriental roots of his craft, moving to Japan and learning to pot expertly in this most ancient and hallowed of traditions. His "A Potter's Book" is still regarded

words by Peter Culley and pictures by Gerry Gilbert

HANDS: THE CATALOGUE

knee line driven  
eardrum scarred  
wrist burned  
ankles twisted  
so far so good<sup>2</sup>

Here is a Gilbert specialty, the “list” poem, and just as Frank O’Hara could delineate a universe of activity and feeling telling us what he did on his lunch hour, Gilbert is able to construct an autobiography out of a seemingly random recounting of bodily insults. As harshly epigrammatic as a good punk song, each line is a medical school slide, a foreshortened narrative at which the squeamish mind recoils. The characteristically enigmatic closing line conflates masochism and dogged endurance into a statement of battered and weary machismo.

The bright, hard surfaces of Gilbert’s poems — shorn of ornament and lyricism, of obviously “literary” devices, adhering to the mundane particulars of an unexceptional life — have often blinded readers to their formal qualities. Just as Courbet and other realist painters of the nineteenth century, who because they sought an “objective” visual apprehension of the world, have thereafter suffered the fate of being judged primarily on the basis of their narrative “content”, the transparency of Gilbert’s means have often obscured the transcendental subversiveness of his ends. By grounding his poetic subjectivity in a culturally assimilated and interiorised photographic gaze, Gilbert seems intent on abolishing the distance between himself and his readers. That this is attempted without self-effacement, self-censorship or restraint, that his “neutrality” arises from within the prejudices and particularities of his experience and personality can be as disconcerting as it is revealing. But what can seem subject-privileging, even egomaniacal, eventually reveals itself as profoundly democratic and utopian.

The implication, throughout Gilbert’s oeuvre, is that for whatever reasons — biological, technological or historical — his apprehension of the world is not really very different from yours or mine, that what connects us is more important than what divides us. By including us so willfully and specifically within his world he gives us the world back; by adhering to its quotidian surface he leaves little room for the subterranean agendas of psychology and ambition. Each poem records an ongoing attempt to create a community grounded in a shared intuition, a commonality of desire.

That Gilbert’s self-imposed position as a “public” poet — that is a poet who has forsaken some degree of autonomy while taking in its place a measure of accountability — is as much a stance within the technical demands of an art as it is a political one within the world, is a dialectic that *HANDS: 40 Years of Photography* uniquely positions one to enter.

The disadvantage of so unified and consistent a public persona is that one’s presence can become easily taken for granted, that the lure of novelty can serve to sideline the tried and true. The very stability of a project can threaten to marginalise it. *HANDS* can be seen as an integral part of an attempt by Gilbert to raise the stakes on his career, to force a

one pair of essays on *HANDS: A Catalogue of Forty Years of Photography* by Gerry Gilbert

That Gilbert’s initial encounter with a great modern figure was with a potter rather than with a writer is perhaps less significant than that it was with a “craftsman” rather than with an “artist”, someone whose ties stretched not only through Zen but through William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement to John Ruskin. The convictions that Leach inherited from his precursors, that a well-made object is by definition a beautiful one, that aesthetic considerations are synonymous with practical ones, are passed on to Gilbert. For Gilbert, the formal aspects of an artwork are relevant only to the degree that they can be made to serve the larger project of re-forming the city, that they can be of use in restitching the torn fabric of the world. Subsequent encounters with the personages and ideas of such figures as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Herman Melville, John Cage, Robert Musil, Gertrude Stein, Robert Duncan, Stan Brakhage, Roy Kiyooka, Jean-Luc Godard, Lucy Rie, Barbara Hepworth, Peter Watkins, Louis Armstrong and Al Neil must be seen in terms of an aesthetic whose clarity of intent and purpose was fully formed at the outset.

The Revised Version of the history of literary postmodernism in Vancouver, whose time line grows dim prior to TISH’s formulation in 1961, and whose narrative is tied into a larger narrative of progression and consolidation, misreads Gilbert by placing the moment of his creation at the point it decides to take notice of him. That this resetting of the record came from outside of the literary establishment was not a fact lost on Gilbert. Like a number of Vancouver writers, Gilbert couldn’t help but notice that the newly reconstituted art world had attention and energy to spare. All that was required to step into its vortex was the will.

Contiguous with the mid-eighties revival of the art world was the establishment of the Vancouver incarnation of the Kootenay School of Writing.<sup>8</sup> Similar to TISH in that the formal energies which drove it were largely imported from south of the border, KSW brought to Vancouver a comparable blend of intellectual energy and arrogance. The forces of reaction, including, irony of ironies, one or two EXTISHers, dutifully lined up against the alien horror, but were so weakened by decades of consensus-mongering that they conceded without much of a fight, leaving the loosely organized but loyal troops of KSW snugly in the vanguard.

When what little smoke there was cleared, Gilbert was among those of his generation left standing. While Gilbert’s radical personism might have seemed a little *revanchiste* to some elements within KSW, he was canny enough to support the wave of new writing from the beginning, rightly treating its literary extremism as the vindication of an outsider status which had been in existence longer than most KSWers had been alive. Gilbert was *there*, dependably and defiantly, at every KSW event, taping for the radio, taking notes, arguing for modes of thought and being that might not otherwise have entered the discourse.

It is this field of energy, particularly the newly forged links between visual art and writing practice that *HANDS: 40 Years of Photography* enters. Arranged in pairs, *HANDS* stretches around the gallery in a continuous line of more than

reassessment of his place within the artistic community that he helped to create.

In his middle fifties, Gilbert has yet to accrue most of the rewards that our culture is capable of bestowing on those who have worked so doggedly and skillfully at their art; no tenured position, no Governor General's award, no university conferences devoted to his output. The city he has inhabited for most of his life, and which has received its most sustained critique and homage in his pages, has not seen fit to honour him in any way. Of course, these omissions have as much to do with Gilbert's own often pugnacious refusal as they do with any CanLit conspiracies, but are symptomatic of one path that literary modernism took in Vancouver in the sixties and the way that Gilbert's career intersected with it.

In 1961 a group of young poets, mostly attending the University of British Columbia classes of professor Warren Tallman, founded a magazine, *TISH*, the purpose of which was both to record their ongoing responses to the formal possibilities that the New American Poetry<sup>3</sup> had opened for them and to articulate their opposition to the Anglicized and moribund Canadian writing establishment. Bright, irreverent, and with the occasional snottiness without which youth is wasted, the editors of *TISH*, in their forgivable enthusiasm, tended to take something close to full credit for the introduction of literary postmodernism to the frontier.

Other young Vancouver poets (among them Gerry Gilbert, Bill Bissett and Maxine Gadd) whose response to many of the same influences might have been thornier, more idiosyncratic, or, perhaps more the point here, might have *predated* *TISH*, were difficult to fit into the new equation. This difficulty has persisted; witness this exchange from the 1990 *Beyond TISH* conference:

ROY MIKI: Warren, was there a pre-*TISH* stage? Was there a nucleus of writers before '61, or in the late '50s?

WARREN TALLMAN: There were "prominent" Canadian writers in town. Earle Birney was in town; Dorothy Livesay was on the scene; Phyllis Webb was partly on the scene, and partly not. But they were working in isolation. There was *no coherent scene whatsoever*, and the *TISH* group was working very much as a group, back and forth, day to day.

GERRY GILBERT: Warren? There was a coherent kind of downtown scene of artists and writers, an inner-city group that had gone on and grown up out of the traditional Vancouver scene.

WARREN TALLMAN: Right. What Gerry is talking about is what I call the "downtown poets." They *were* there. In fact the downtown poets and the *TISH* poets got in touch very fast.<sup>4</sup> (*Italics mine*)

The "downtown poets" are therefore only allowed their footnote in the Authorized Version because of their swift and canny capitulation to the new torch bearers, and, in 1990, only at Gilbert's impertinent insistence. Having silenced Gilbert

two hundred photographs, hung without frames or identifying labels, held to the wall only with tiny nails. Despite its subtitle, *HANDS* is not a cozy trip down memory lane but rather the rich results of a core sample driven deep into the subterranean alluvia of our collective pasts, a long line of images paired off as if they themselves were organs of sense.

By reading back to his own beginnings, Gilbert asserts not only the legitimacy of his own history, but the legitimacy of history itself as daily practice and art. And in an era in which the "end of history" is proclaimed by those forces which would re-write it for their own ends, Gilbert's long line of engagement points defiantly to a realisable human future.

Peter Culley March 1992

1 *Moby Jane*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987).

2 *Azure Blues*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991).

3 Simply put, the group of poets, among them Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, were explicitly influenced by the work of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound.

4 *Beyond TISH*, ed. Douglas Barbour (Edmonton/Vancouver: NeWest/West Coast Line, 1991).

5 *Craft Slices*, (Toronto: Oberon, 1985).

6 This period is well delineated by Stan Douglas in his introduction to *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991).

7 *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983).

8 For a more detailed look at this, see Nancy Shaw's essay "Expanded Consciousness & Company Types" in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991).



for the moment by the ritual repetition of the loaded and patronizing term "downtown poet", the conversation is quickly steered back to another retelling of the now hauntingly familiar story of TISH, and how it grew.

The difference of social milieu and context that separated Gilbert from the editors of TISH were, at the time, of little moment. Both were, after all, united against the common enemies of provincialism and cant, both drew liberally from the same stream of influence. Neither could these differences have been said to alter the trajectory of Gilbert's career, fixed as it was on its particular course. But as the TISH poets and their students took their places within the Academy and began to compile the histories of their era and milieu, the problem of assessing Gilbert's place within it was exacerbated by subtle problems of class. What had been university students interacting with a poet who happened to live off campus was now tenured professors writing, for the public record, about someone who lived precariously and strangely, someone for whom the rebellion of youth had carried over into adulthood and middle age. An eccentric, a rebel, the sort of person you might run into "downtown". Here is George Bowering from *Craft Slices*:

Although he makes more public appearances all across the country than do most other poets, he is the epitome of the "underground" poet. His output has been prodigious and continual for 25 years, but he does not show up in the commercial anthologies or the critical journals.<sup>5</sup>

Bowering, in an otherwise perceptive short essay, does a couple of strange things here. "Underground" is made to seem a condition unrelated to audience, but instead to the much less important questions of major-journal reviews and anthology appearances — and by "commercial anthologies" can he be referring to the four-volume *Anthology of Canadian Poetry* which he was then editing, and in which Gilbert is not included? If Gilbert, through his countless public and private readings, weekly radio show and ubiquitous active *presence* reaches more breathing humans than any comparable figure — how do we define him, and by implication, his audience? "Underground" can also be a place of disposal, where awkward questions can be safely buried, never to rise again.

If the interdisciplinary and public nature of Gilbert's project leads to a certain amount of incomprehension and condescension from the poets of his own generation, it could hardly have mattered to a Gilbert immersed in activity and blessed with a Miltonic self-regard. But the effects of early misreadings tended to accumulate over time, until by the mid-seventies it was possible for much of the Vancouver literary community to simultaneously take Gilbert for granted as a cultural force while ignoring or dismissing his work. And as the great interdisciplinary moment in Vancouver art retreated into institutional specialisms, Gilbert was forced to define his identity as artist in terms in which he could have had little interest.

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Gerry Gilbert is a Vancouver-based poet, artist and editor. The two hundred photographs in the exhibition are a survey of the photographic archive Gerry Gilbert has accumulated since the 1940s. Peter Culley is a Nanaimo-based poet and critic who has published three books of poetry and a forthcoming book, *The Climax Forest*, will be published in 1992. Culley has also written visual art reviews and articles for national publications.

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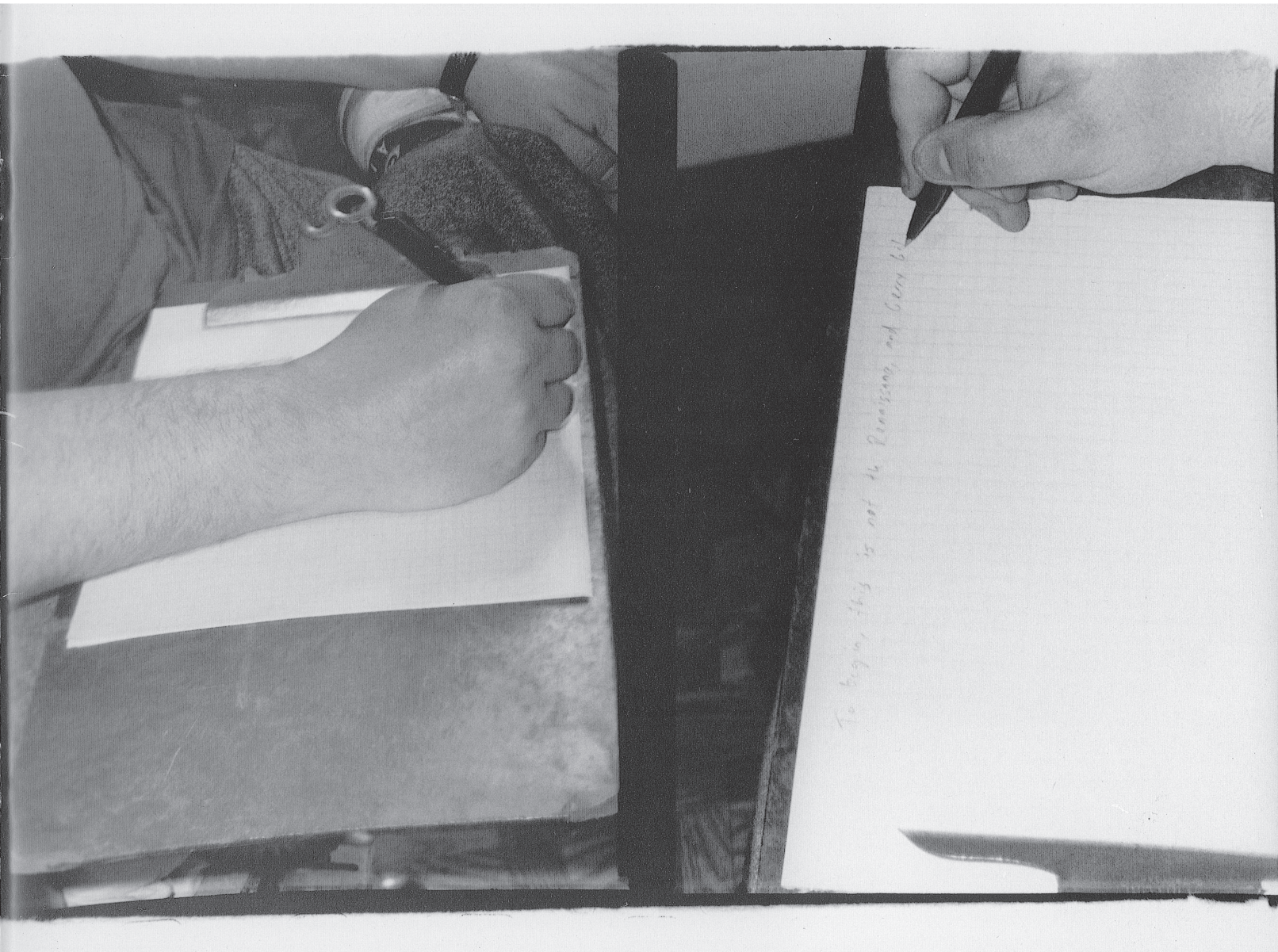
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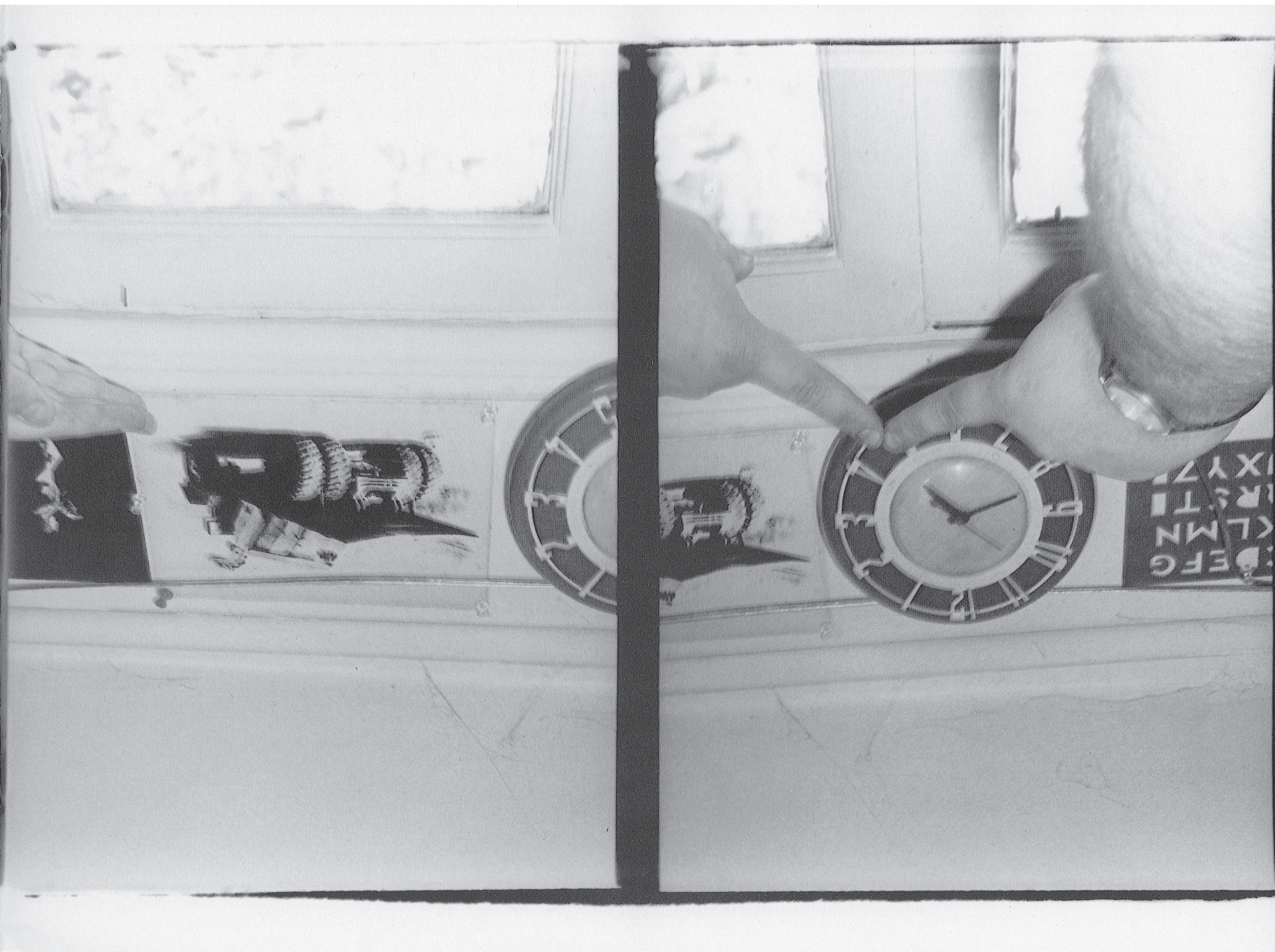




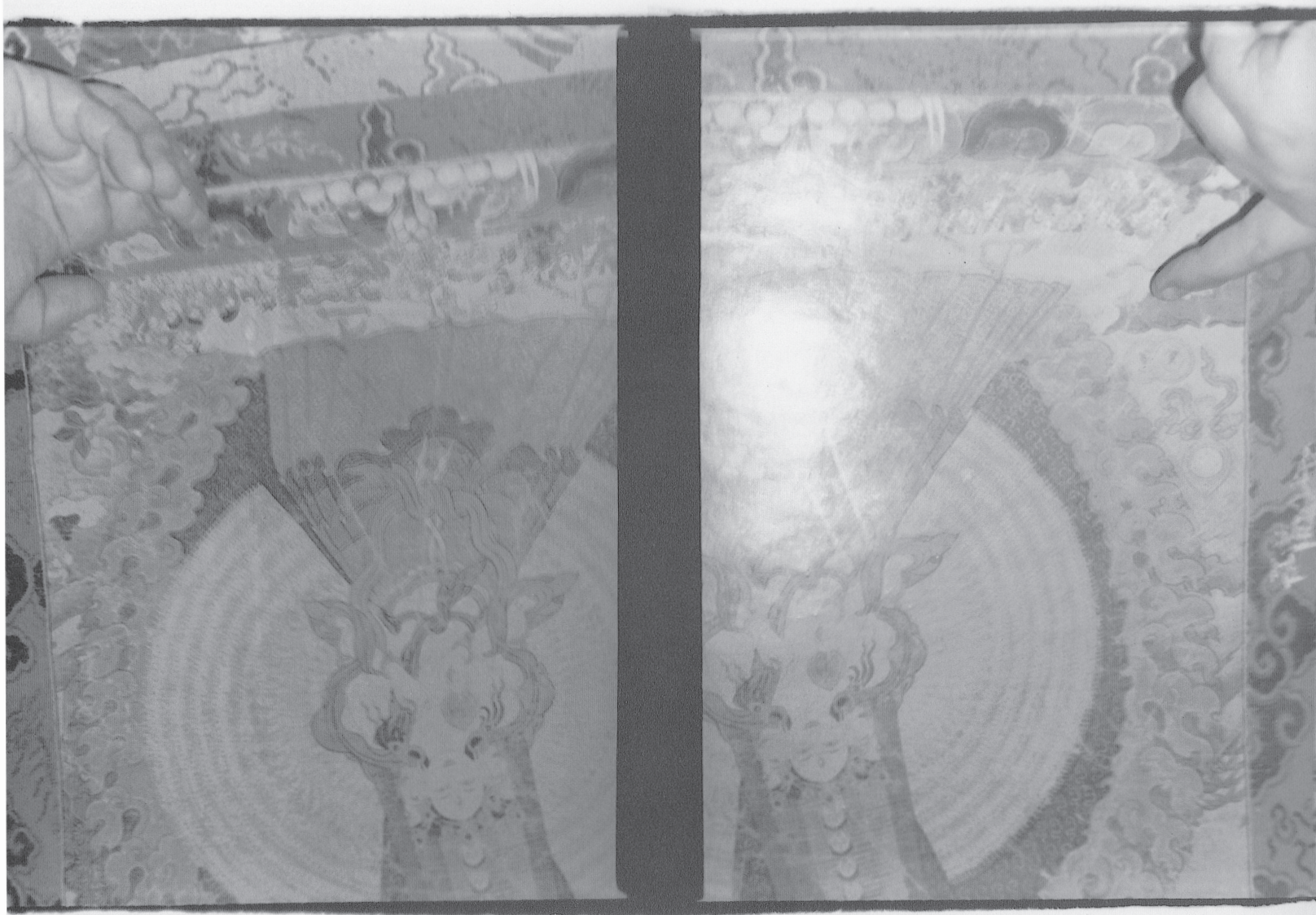




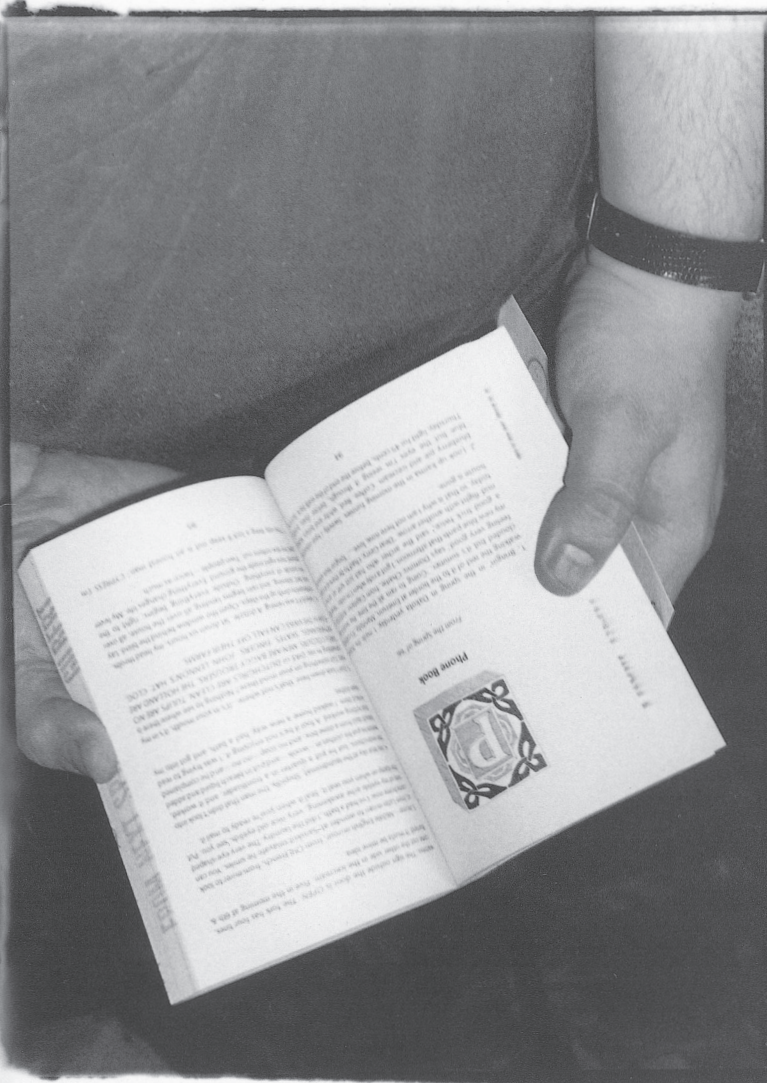








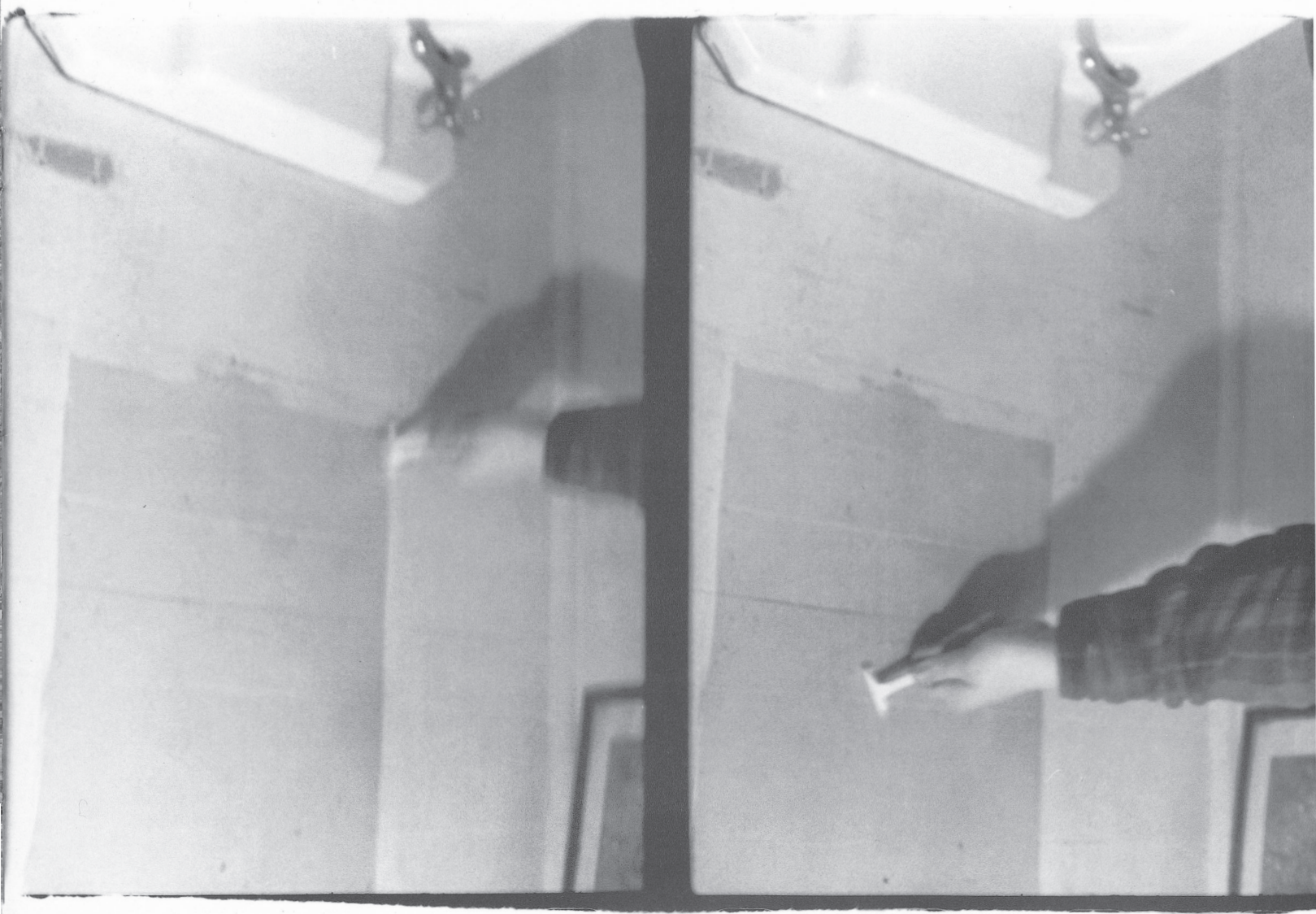


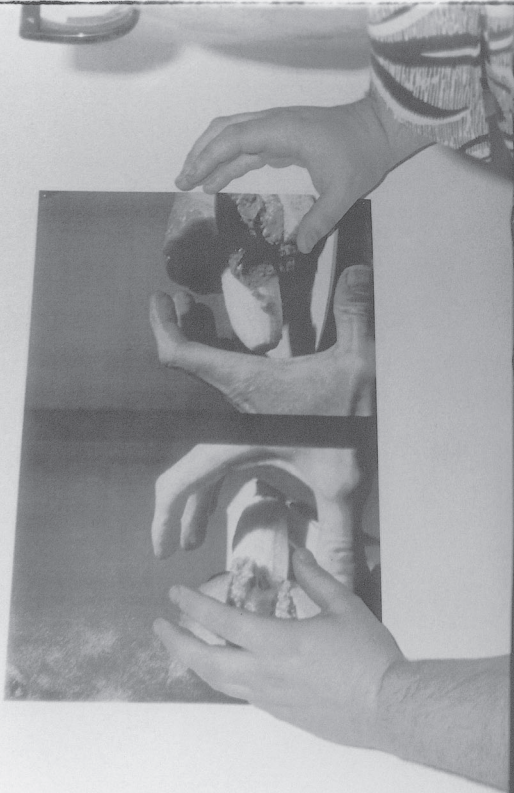




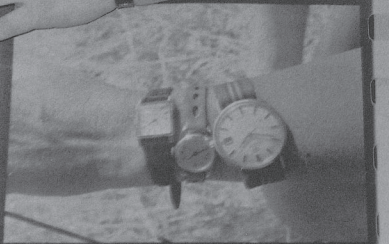
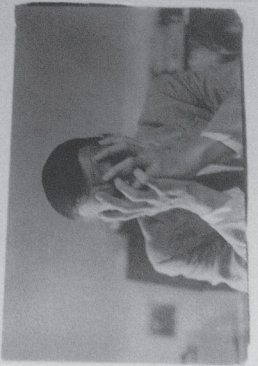
















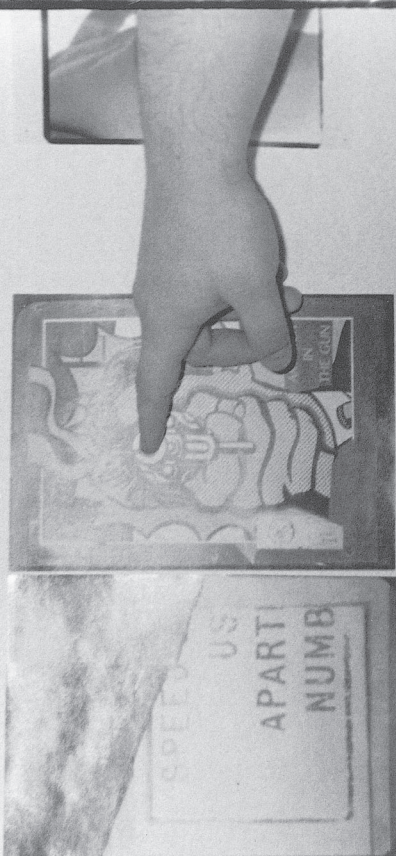




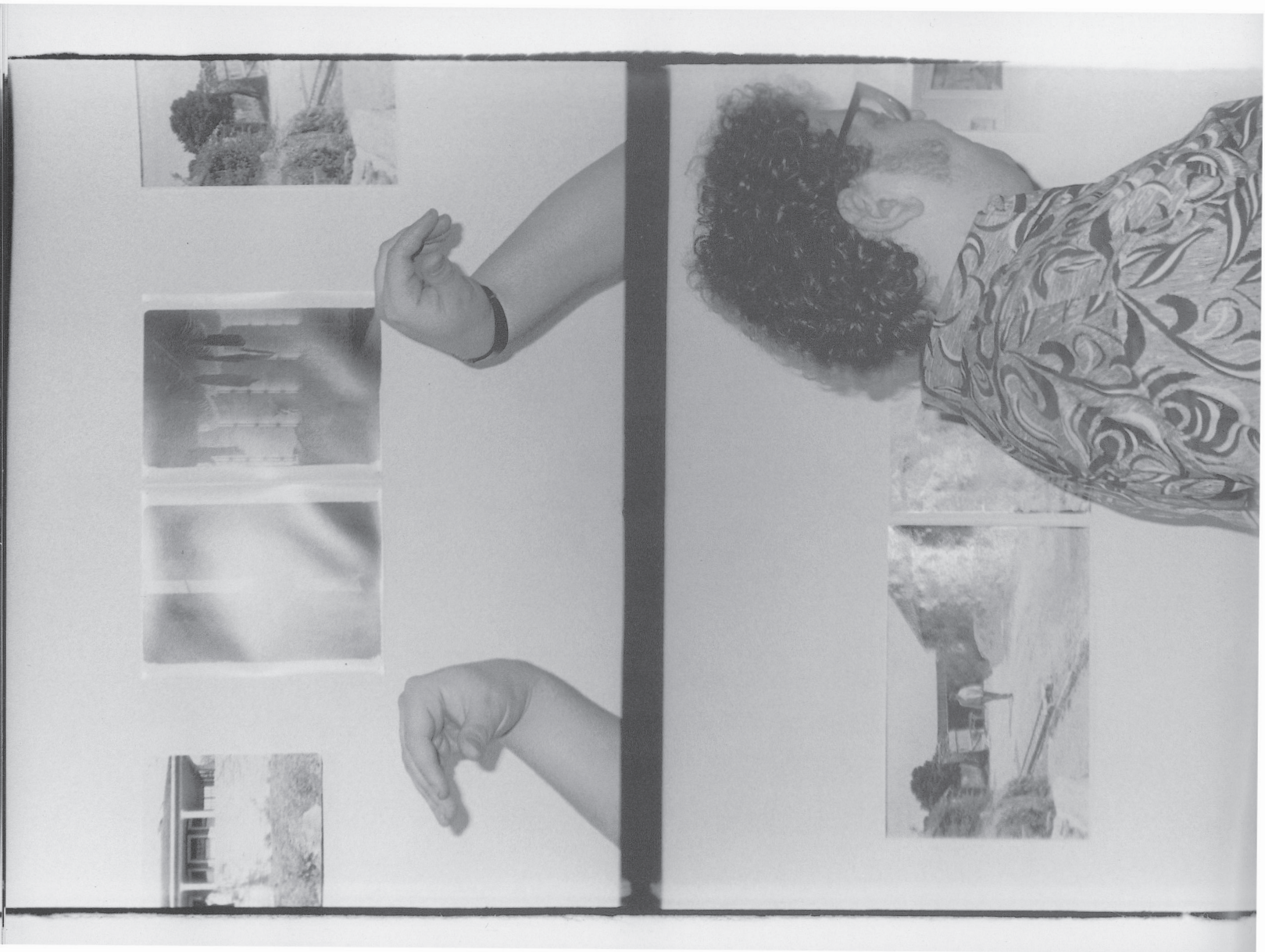


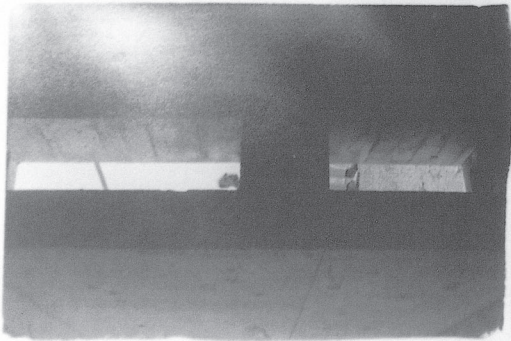
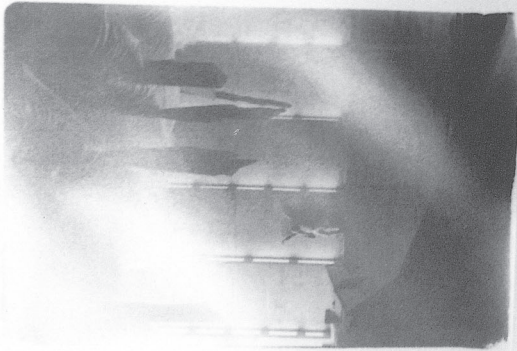








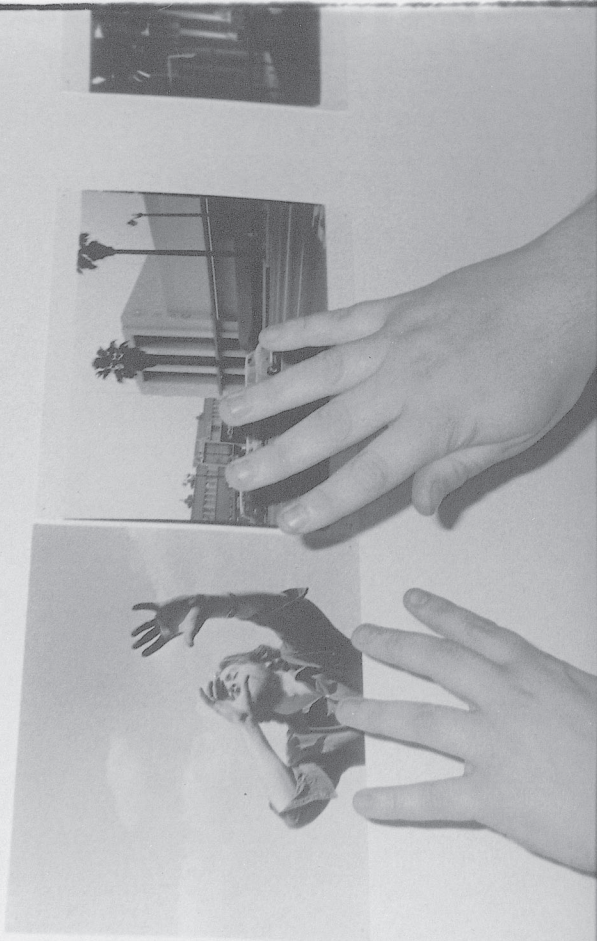














# HANDS:

A Catalogue of Forty  
Years of Photography



