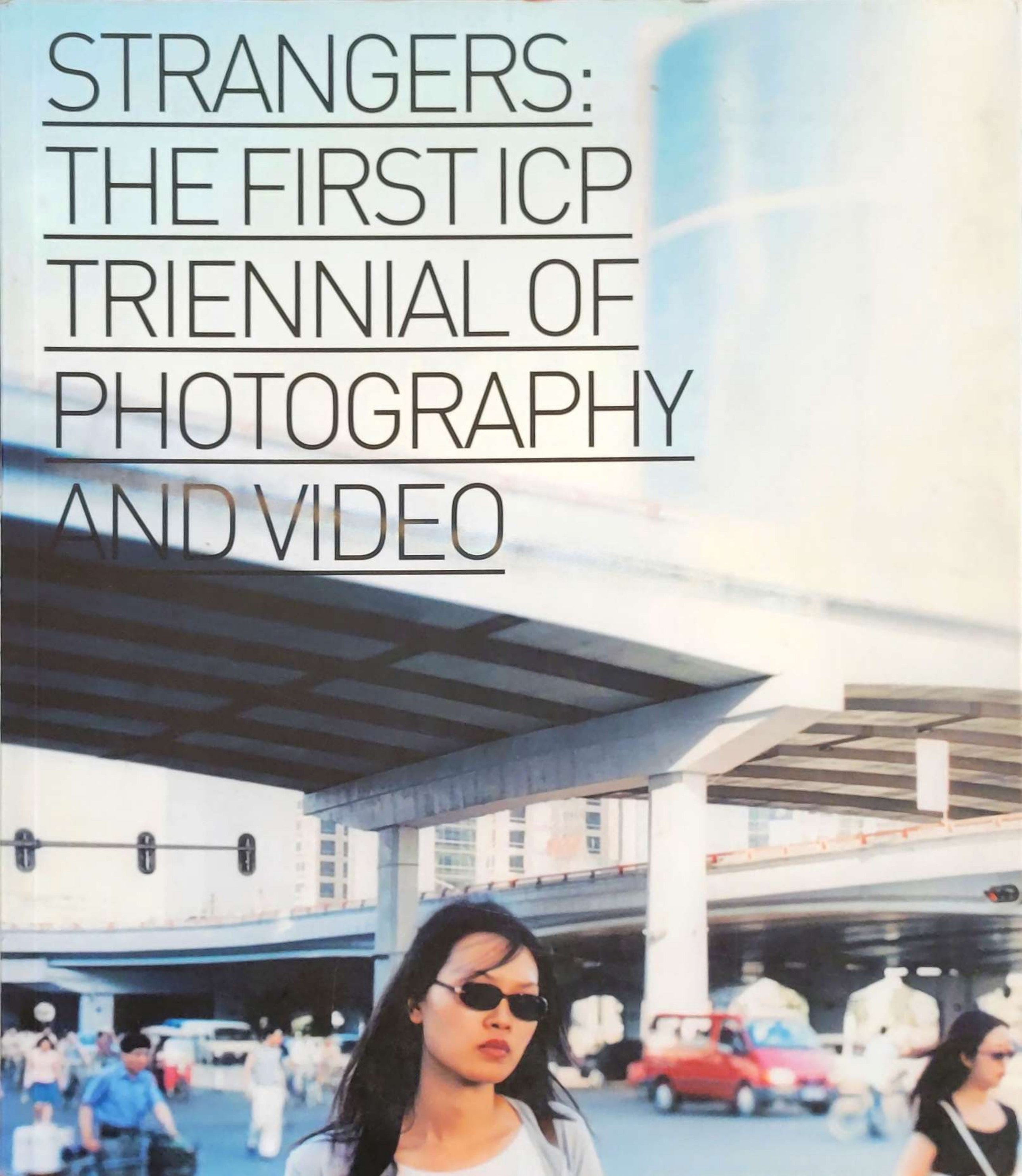
STRANGERS: THE FIRST ICP TRIENNIAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO



THE USES OF STRANGERS

Christopher Phillips

Encountering strangers is one of the defining activities of urban public space, which no doubt accounts for the hold that the figure of the stranger has exercised over the modern literary and sociological imagination. In the sprawling cities that ring the planet, the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people are filled by countless fleeting interactions with persons whom they've never seen before and likely never will again. The result is a familiar mix of fascination and fear that permeates urban culture and much of the literature that partakes of it. Think of the way that the experience of wading into an teeming crowd, for example, becomes the occasion for a specifically edgy, erotic thrill in the writing of literary modernists from Charles Baudelaire to André Breton to John Dos Passos.

In recent decades, visual artists have explored many ways to turn the anonymous urban population into a kind of raw artistic material and to aesthetically "work" on its components. Conceptual artist Douglas Heubler, for example, in his *Variable Piece #70* (1971), announced his intention to "photograph the existence of everyone alive"—a quixotic and admittedly futile task, whose progress was periodically evidenced in accumulations of black-and-white photographs of random urban passersby. Vito Acconci employed a more intimate but equally impersonal approach in his notorious *Seedbed* performance (1972). Spending hours each day lying beneath a special floorlike platform that filled an otherwise empty gallery, Acconci responded to the sound of visitors walking above him. Speaking into a microphone that carried his words into the gallery space, he spun out sexual fantasies about the unseen gallery-goer while masturbating—an elaborate play on the desperate longing that artists feel for their usually distant audience.

To engineer a face-to-face confrontation with an anonymous audience was the aim of Marina Abramovic's harrowing 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*. She announced the scenario in advance: she would spread a table with seventy-two assorted objects (lipstick, a fork, a camera, a needle, a knife, a hat, matches, etc.) that anyone "can use on me as desired" during a six-hour period. The photographs that document the performance show that Abramovic—doubly foreign as a Serbian in Naples and as a woman questioning the ideal of female passivity in a masculine culture—prompted aggressively hostile and physically violent reactions from her largely male audience.

The works in this exhibition, which date largely from the past three years, reveal a new proliferation of techniques that seek to bring the stranger within the orbit of art. In the photographs of John Schabel, light, no matter how remote, always signals a human presence. In a series of eerie night-time landscapes from the 1990s, he positioned his camera so that the line where earth meets sky is softly lit by a glow which emanates from towns just over the horizon. Turning to an urban setting, Schabel adapted to his own ends the classic "street photography" approach of predecessors such as Joel Meyerowitz, Garry Winogrand, and Mark Cohen, who often used a portable flash device to illuminate figures otherwise sunk in darkness. Schabel carries out a radical twist, however, by secretly enlisting unwitting amateur photographers as his secret accomplices.

Stationing himself at nighttime settings where tourists or celebrants are likely to gather on the sidewalks of New York City, Schabel patiently waits until he senses that a nearby snapshooter is about to make an exposure. He then opens the shutter of his own handheld camera, sometimes for several seconds, until the scene is suddenly lit by the burst of the other photographer's flash.

The resulting pictures, when enlarged as black-and-white prints, are at first glance visually baffling and only gradually become decipherable. Most seem to describe a nocturnal encounter between urban pedestrians and a strange luminous force. In the most legible photograph of the series, we stand behind a young woman with upswept hair who appears transfixed by a marvelous apparition: a bowl of light that shimmers mysteriously before her in the void. Other images invite us to imagine bizarre scenarios. In one, a fellow in a white T-shirt raises his hands as if in disbelief to his head, which seems to have been vaporized in a blast of light. In other photographs, Schabel's prolonged exposures lend a woozy unsteadiness to the figures and their architectural surroundings, which all seem to be melting in a slow swirl. Most startling of all are those images that consist of no more than a central, luminous explosion.

The haphazard quality of these pictures contributes to their curious fascination. In this series, Schabel combines intuition, perseverance, and an extreme reluctance to prejudge what might give rise to a memorable photograph. Having established a set of working parameters, he allows the chance operations of his subjects to create the visible traces that we're left to ponder.

If Schabel's method rules out any real contact with the people he photographs, Mexico City-based artist Yoshua Okon more directly engages his subjects, if only to persuade them to take part in improvisational video performances that straddle the line between reality and fiction. In *Orilltese a la Orilla* (Pull over to the side, 1999-2000), for example, he turned his camera on uniformed policemen and security guards who obligingly acted out the techniques they employ to terrify ordinary citizens, directing menacing words and sometimes obscene gestures at the camera.

For the three-channel video *New Décor* (2002), Okon set up a makeshift video studio in a storefront furniture shop in predominantly Hispanic East Los Angeles. He then invited passersby inside to take part in improvisational routines before the camera. He cast them in timeworn soap-opera scenarios: confrontations with suspicious lovers, break-up scenes, emotional battles with family members. With minimal prompting, Okon's instant stars let loose with spirited performances that we see from multiple angles on three monitors.

In one segment, an angry young woman hurls verbal abuse at a young man who plays her cheating boyfriend. "Why is she all butt-naked? Why do you always gotta be doing the same maniac things? . . . Every time I fucking leave, you gotta be doing it with her. You maniac!" In another segment, in

a set festooned with fake Baroque statuary and with cameras and lights plainly in sight, a man and woman act out a break-up scene. The man's well-oiled routine, alternately plaintive, cajoling, and threatening, suggests that this is not unfamiliar territory for him.

> "It's up to you. There's a lot more people that love me. If you don't like me, you can always walk out the door. If I don't work, if I'm lazy—it's up to you. You got nice furniture, you got everything you need, you got money in the bank, you got a brand new car. What else could I do for you? I was not born to work. Donkeys work, I don't work. . . . And you know what? The second you walk out of here, there's another girl walking in—and better than you, better looking. And if you say that I'm getting fat, getting lazy, it's because of you. Because you haven't been treating me the way you should, as a woman. But you know what? I'm not going to take it from you any more. So let me watch my program."

Later we see the same ebullient fellow in another scenario, holding a sign that reads "$40,000." Now shirtless, he flexes his muscles, beams and roars, "Yeah! All right! Money! I'm gonna spend it tonight! I love it!"

Finally, we witness a woman wearing a headband energetically strangling a hapless plaster bunny. "You short ugly piece of fucking shit! Oooh! Stupid! Just look at those ears. I just hate them. You're so ugly. My mother-in-law couldn't even wear a dress to my wedding, she had to wear a stinking second-hand piece of shit leisure suit. For her son she got a dress, she wore a dress to his wedding. Bitch! I could just stomp you into a million pieces. I wish I could just pull those whiskers. Your paws aren't lucky, nothing about you is lucky. I'll turn you into a handbag, that's what you're good for, a handbag to put a sack of shit in."

Okon's collaborators know they're being recorded on camera, but the flimsy fiction of the soap-opera scenario allows them to throw themselves uninhibitedly into their "roles." Their impromptu, out-of-control performances are hard to stop watching, since they allow us a momentary glimpse, whether we want it or not, into the workings of their psyches. Caught in a pop-culture version of Freud's talking cure, they are revealing more of themselves to the artist and to the unseen audience than they know.

Coco Fusco also recruited strangers to take part in her video *Els Segadors* (The Reapers, 2001). Her aim was not only to inject a note of unpredictability into the work but also to explore the way that language can mark a stranger as foreigner. Commissioned to make a new work in Barcelona, Fusco was struck by the long and continuing tension within Spain over the status of the regional Catalan language. Banned for decades during the authoritarian Franco regime, it is now officially promoted throughout the Catalan region in northeast Spain. Today in Barcelona, the ability to speak Catalan is one of the most important local indices of belonging or not belonging.

Fusco placed ads in local newspapers seeking residents of Barcelona who were nonnative, accented speakers of Catalan. She assembled those who responded in a studio outfitted with a sound stage, and asked each to sing "Els Segadors," the venerable song that became the Catalan anthem in 2001. In the video, each singer offers an individual rendition of the song's dramatic lyrics, and then recounts his or her personal experience as a bearer of a "foreign" accent in contemporary Barcelona.

Yoshua Okon, *Orillese a la Orilla* (Pull over to the side), 1999-2003)

The lyrics of "Els Segadors" tell the story of the slaughter of Barcelona's citizens on Sept. 11, 1714, by the soldiers of the occupying Spanish army. "A thousand foreigners have entered Barcelona, they enter like the reapers . . . They killed the Viceroy entering the gallery . . Where is our captain, where is our flag?" The song grimly celebrates this event as proof of the Catalan ability to endure the horrors of war and to unite for ultimate victory. It urges Catalans to mercilessly wreak vengeance on their oppressors—"Take a good swipe with the sickle, defenders of the land."

The renditions of "Els Segadors" that we hear are as varied as the performers. Some performances are relatively simple and straightforward, others ironic. One woman does a salsa version, another a hip-hop version; a young man playing an electric guitar turns it into a 1950s pop song. A woman speaks of the persistent tension between native Catalans and immigrants from the rest of Spain who often resist learning the local language. Even those who make an effort to acquire Catalan are socially stigmatized for their inability to speak the "pure" Catalan of a native. The speakers' statements sometimes belie their looks: a shirtless skinhead lucidly observes that "nationalism brings us many problems; it can even become racism."

Fusco's *Els Segadors* is no morality play pitting the forces of benighted parochialism against those of enlightened cosmopolitanism. Hearing repeatedly the intransigent lyrics of the anthem, we begin to feel the weight and pull of Catalan history; hearing the stories of those whose speech inevitably brands them as "strangers" in modern Barcelona, we sense their burning frustration at being relegated to a second-class status by an accident of accent. A fascinating microstudy of the dynamics of belonging and not belonging in one of the most open and liberal of European cities, Fusco's *Els Segadors* suggests why the figure of the stranger will continue to reverberate in the twenty-first century. □