ERICA BAUM

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Erica Baum, i The Public Imagination,i at Galerie CrÈvecoeur, Paris, through Nov. 2.

Interview by Steel Stillman
Studio photography by Adrian Gaut

IN THE STUDIO

STEEL STILLMAN is a New York-based artist and writer.


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OVER THE PAST 20 years, in nearly a dozen series, Erica Baum has photographed words, word fragments and photographs in the places she's found them—on blackboards, in library card catalogues, in books, in newspapers and elsewhere. In these venues, words and photographs tend to be small, so her pictures are tightly cropped close-ups of spaces that are never more than a few inches deep. But because words and photographs, whatever their material condition, also convey meaning, Baum's microcosms often harbor macrocosmic implications. Her understated photographs (rarely exceeding 20 by 24 inches) are about what language is about: matters of human concern from the ineffable to the mundane, from the solemn to the absurd.

Baum's is an art of recontextualization—a strategy that was made famous in the 1980s under the banner of appropriation but is as intrinsic to the medium of photography as the camera lens. It is an art of reweaving, or rewriting, bits of existing reality into altogether new representations. Having majored in anthropology as an undergraduate at Barnard College, Baum has since turned her anthropological gaze toward our own word- and image-based culture. At first encounter, the words and photographs she depicts seem to pertain largely to their original purposes, and to their mostly anonymous authors and audiences; but gradually we understand that they also pertain to us: in reading and looking at her images, we write ourselves into their stories.

Baum was born in 1961 in New York City. Her father, an engineer, died when she was 12. Her mother, who is in her 70s, earned a degree in library science in the 1970s, foreshadowing her daughter's preoccupations. Baum graduated from the alternative high school City-As-School (fellow students included Jean-Michel Basquiat and Zoe Leonard) and then attended Barnard, where she received her BA in 1984. She earned an MA in teaching English as a second language from Hunter College in 1988, and an MFA in photography from Yale in 1994. She has had nearly 20 solo exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe since 1995, and has been in more than 60 group shows. But it wasn't until 2008, when she joined the New York gallery Bureau, that her career began to accelerate. It is a sign of her still-rising stature that over 100 of her works were featured in last year's São Paulo Bienal, and that she has five solo shows this year. The final two of these are both called "The Public Imagination" (which was also the title of her 2011 one-person show at Circuit in Lausanne); the first exhibition is currently on view at Galerie Crèvecoeur in Paris, and the second opens at Lüttgenmeijer in Berlin in early November. Baum lives and works in New York, in a second-floor loft in SoHo that she shares with her husband and teenage son. Her studio is quite small, as befits the scale of her subject matter; it opens onto the family's north-facing living room, where we talked one morning last summer, at the start of a heat wave.

STEEL STILLMAN Was writing your first ambition?

ERICA BAUM It was. I was an early bookworm, and in elementary school I wrote stories that occasionally won prizes. Reading and writing gave me my first sense of myself. But throughout my childhood, art was always in the picture, and I spent hours drawing while watching TV. Then, in my teens, the balance shifted and I started to devote more of myself to art than to writing.

STILLMAN How did you become interested in anthropology?

BAUM Toward the end of high school, I'd wanted to take a college course in primate behavior at the New School; but because it wasn't being offered when I showed up to register, I took one in cultural anthropology instead, and something clicked. As a kid on the Upper West Side in the '60s, I'd been a participant observer in that neighborhood's cultural melting pot, so anthropology's attention to diverse ways of being in the world resonated with me deeply. At Barnard, anthropology led me to the literatures of Africa, Latin America and Asia, and I spent time in Kenya and Japan. In the literatures of other countries, particularly in Japanese poetry and fiction, I found rich narratives of everyday life. Anthropology and literature never eclipsed my interest in art-making, though; instead, in college, the two became the twin foundations for my ongoing engagement with art, and the sources of my inspiration.

STILLMAN When did photography come in?

BAUM In the mid-'80s I was living in Brooklyn, studying at night for a master's degree in teaching ESL, and working in the daytime for the NYC Parks Department, helping children paint outdoor murals in communities around the city. One of my responsibilities was to photograph the murals, and my boss, thinking I was pretty good at it, encouraged me to do more. I'd been making collages and paintings with found photographs at the time, and the idea of being able to make my own images excited me. I was attracted by the immediacy and speed of photography; it was faster than painting and more like thinking.

STILLMAN Why, after a few years of working as an ESL teacher, did you go back to school for an MFA?

BAUM I'd gotten married in 1989, and after taking hundreds of photographs on an extended honeymoon in Spain, I'd come back to New York wanting to make a firmer commitment to photography and to mastering its craft. It took a year or two to put a portfolio together and to apply to graduate school, but, once I got in, Yale was great for me. Able, for the first time, to experiment with large-format cameras, I began my work there in almost anthropological fashion, taking photographs of college life—fascinated, in particular, by Yale's preppy, upper-middle-class aspects, which were foreign to me. Gradually I focused less on the students and more on details and textures, until I found myself photographing the squiggles, marks and partial erasures left on blackboards after classes were dismissed. These images were usually cropped to exclude the blackboard edges, so what remained in the frames appeared without context, leaving viewers to fill in the blanks. The "Blackboards" [1994-96] were my first

Erica Baum: *Untitled (A)*, 1996, gelatin silver print, 20 by 24 inches, from "Blackboards" series. Images unless otherwise noted, courtesy the Bureau, New York.

mature series, and with them my entire love of art came into play, from the rich ambiguities of modernist painting and drawing to the rule-based conceptual practices of Sol LeWitt and Hiroshi Sugimoto. As Sugimoto had done with his movie theater series, I'd established a set of parameters within which theoretically endless encounters could unfold.

STILLMAN You discovered your next series in the Yale library. What led you to the card catalogue, of all things?

BAUM I'd gotten into the habit of lugging my 4-by-5 view camera, tripod and lights through empty classroom buildings, when one Saturday I found all the classrooms full of high school students taking tests. Prepared and determined to work, I headed over to the library, pulled out a card catalogue drawer and took a picture. It wasn't as peculiar a choice as it might seem. For one thing, I'd already taken a few pictures at the library as part of my series on student life [Untitled, 1993]; for another, I'd had filing jobs as a teenager, so I knew there were amusements to be had in unlikely places. Opening that card drawer was a kind of revelation: there were whole worlds in there. Photography, I realized, was a form of concentration; I could turn my attention to anything.

With the "Card Catalogues" [1994-98], I came to understand more clearly what had dawned on me with the "Blackboards" series: that language is the core subject matter of my work. In my pictures, preexisting signifiers yield new signifieds. The words you see in the "Card Catalogues" are mostly category headings; they operate visually in relationship to one another, or in relation to the receding landscape of their drawer's interior, while also referring to the unseen content in their file sections. These word/word and word/space juxtapositions mix humor and seriousness, recasting historical and philosophical themes, while the photographs' flat-footed documentary style points elsewhere, to the institutional and epistemological authorities who invented card catalogues in the first place.

STILLMAN In the late '90s, you began work on a series of photographs of word lists, gleaned from book indexes. To make them, you xeroxed and enlarged selections from unidentified indexes, usually no more than three or four lines; collaged them into high-contrast black-and-white fields of seemingly abstract pattern; and then photographed the results.

BAUM I'd been looking at old nonfiction books, mostly early 20th-century science and philosophy hardcovers, when it occurred to me that the topics they treated had a broader range than you'd find today, and that their indexes read like poetry. I began collecting and copying indexes from books of all kinds, even contemporary ones, and enlarg-

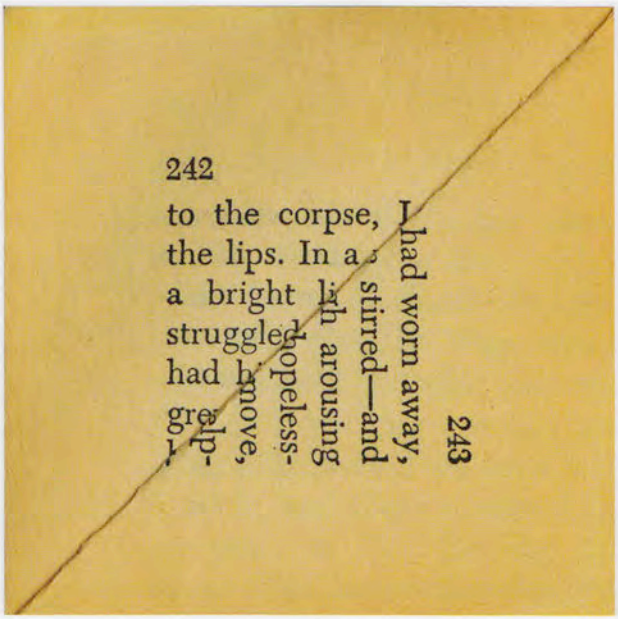
ing excerpts from them. As I xeroxed I became absorbed in all the visual noise that that kind of high-contrast enlarging generates: near-abstract representations of the edges of pages, or of the weaves of cloth bindings, etc. I began making two piles: one of index excerpts and another of visual artifacts.

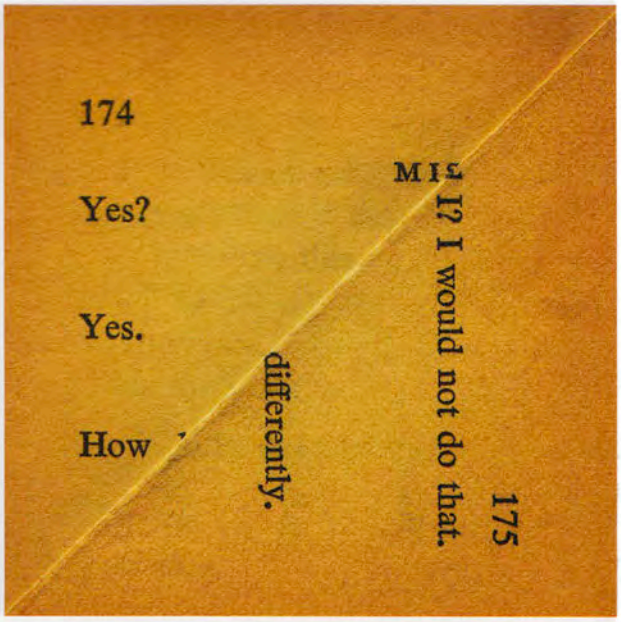
Combining an index from one pile with a pattern from the other seemed at first to violate my straightforward, true-to-reality photographic principles—but of course a Xerox machine, like a scanner today, is just another camera, and I liked being able to put back into the image of an index some evidence of the process by which it had been made. With the "Indexes" [1999-ongoing], considerable time often separates the gathering of material from the editing decisions about what to do with it. Not being able to remember where something came from can free me to imagine where else it might go and what else it might mean. In all my work, I photograph real things and seek to retain something of their original resonances, but the image that results always points elsewhere.

STILLMAN With the series "The Naked Eye," which you began in 2008 and continue to work on, human figures entered your repertoire. These images resemble collages but are in fact unaltered straight photographs of cheap paperback books from the '50s, '60s and '70s, themselves all illustrated with photographs. The paperbacks are opened like fans and photographed with the camera pointed directly into their interiors, the frames filled with slivers of still imagery and text and the colored edges of pages.

BAUM The "Naked Eyes" are pictures of books that I don't usually read: movie tie-ins, true-crime stories, political biographies. One of the first was of a book on UFOs, which I cracked open and photographed more or less at random. (UFO witnesses' frequent assertions that their sightings are made with their "naked eyes" gave the series its title.)

That first photograph, like the first card-catalogue image, suggested myriad possibilities; each spreading of the pages would produce an entirely different picture. The "Naked Eyes" have a cinematic quality, part documentary and part fiction. Like film stills, they both conjure and withhold their stories, and viewers can project into them what they will. Making them, I'm always on the lookout for characters in the midst of something, bound into would-be narratives the way they are bound into the pages of the book, characters who are absorbed in their own web of words and images. My initial attraction to these books was material—to the bright colors of their edges, the discoloring of their acidic pages, the presence of photographs—but the truth is that these books and their imagery are imbued





Left to right, *Corpse* and *Differently*, both 2009, pigment print, 9 inches square, from the "Dog Ear" series.

with the popular culture I grew up with. Anthropologically speaking, they are artifacts from my youth.

STILLMAN In 2009, not long after embarking on the "Naked Eyes," you started another series, also ongoing: "Dog Ear." For these, you scan and enlarge corners of book pages that you've very precisely turned down to create concrete poems in which a few words or lines from one page meet, at 90 degrees, words or lines from the following page. The "Dog Ears" present the reader/viewer with a conundrum: whether to approach them as having two voices (by reading first one page and then the other) or one (by reading, often stutteringly, across and down the fold).

BAUM I love the fact that dog-earing is something many readers do, and that it results in fortuitous, ordinarily overlooked juxtapositions of words. I'd been considering doing something with it for years—ever since noting my son's origami-like dog-earing as he was learning to read—when I was invited to do a language project for Lance Wakeling's Private Circulation blog. Often, starting a new project, I have only faith and determination to go on, but this time I found several good dog-ears right away. Later I realized how lucky I'd been: the series has an extremely high failure rate; not just any fold will do.

That said, there is no right way to read them. In principle, they should work either way. On various occasions, I or others have performed them at readings, and, because I tend to have favored routes, I'm always pleased to hear them read differently. I particularly loved my poet friend Kim Rosenfield's 2011 readings of them at the Kitchen and PS1 because she invented sounds for the typographical oddities produced by the folds.

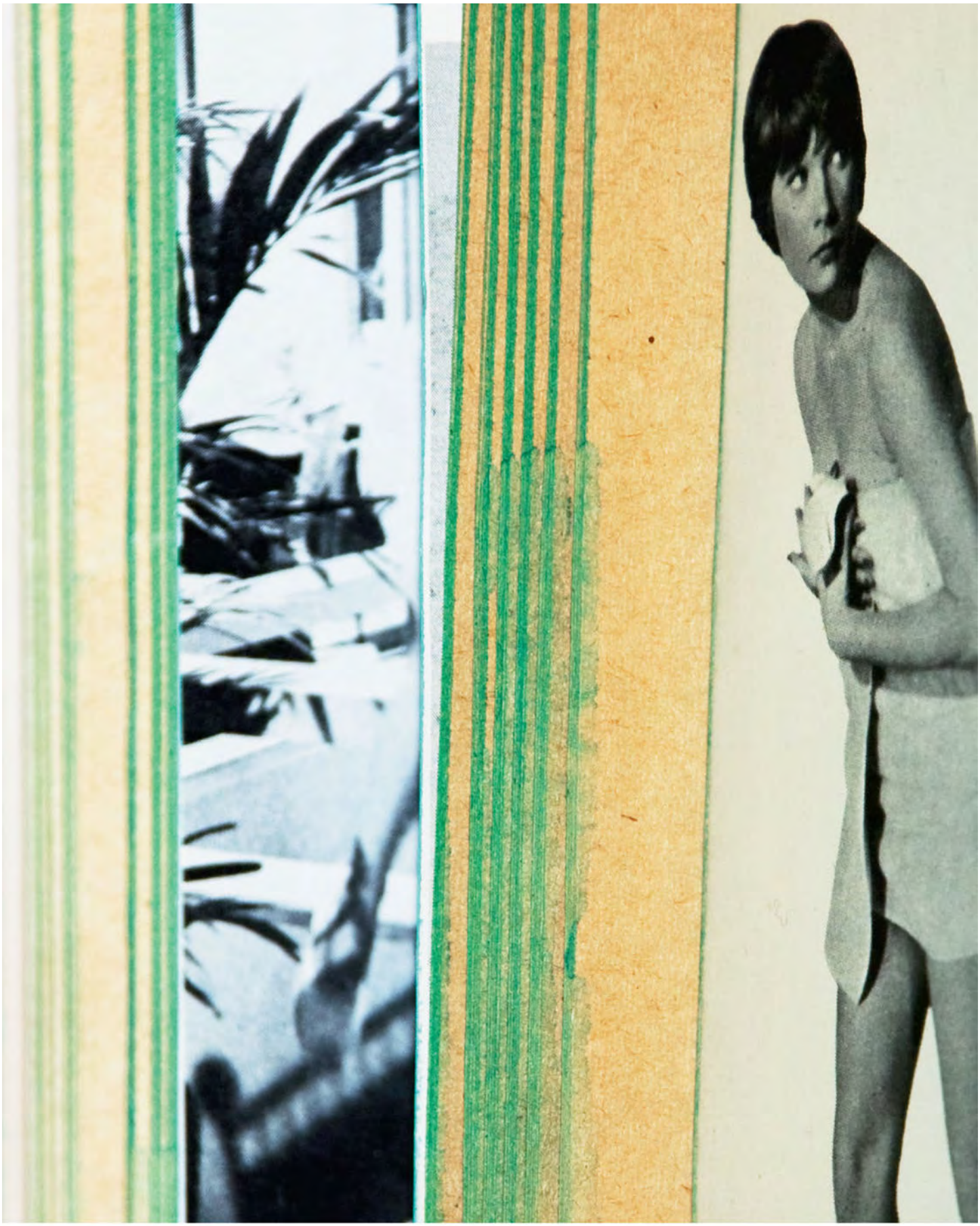
STILLMAN Much as I like looking at the "Dog Ears" as matted and framed works on the wall, I find the experience curiously bipolar, as though the pleasures of looking and reading were vying with each other.

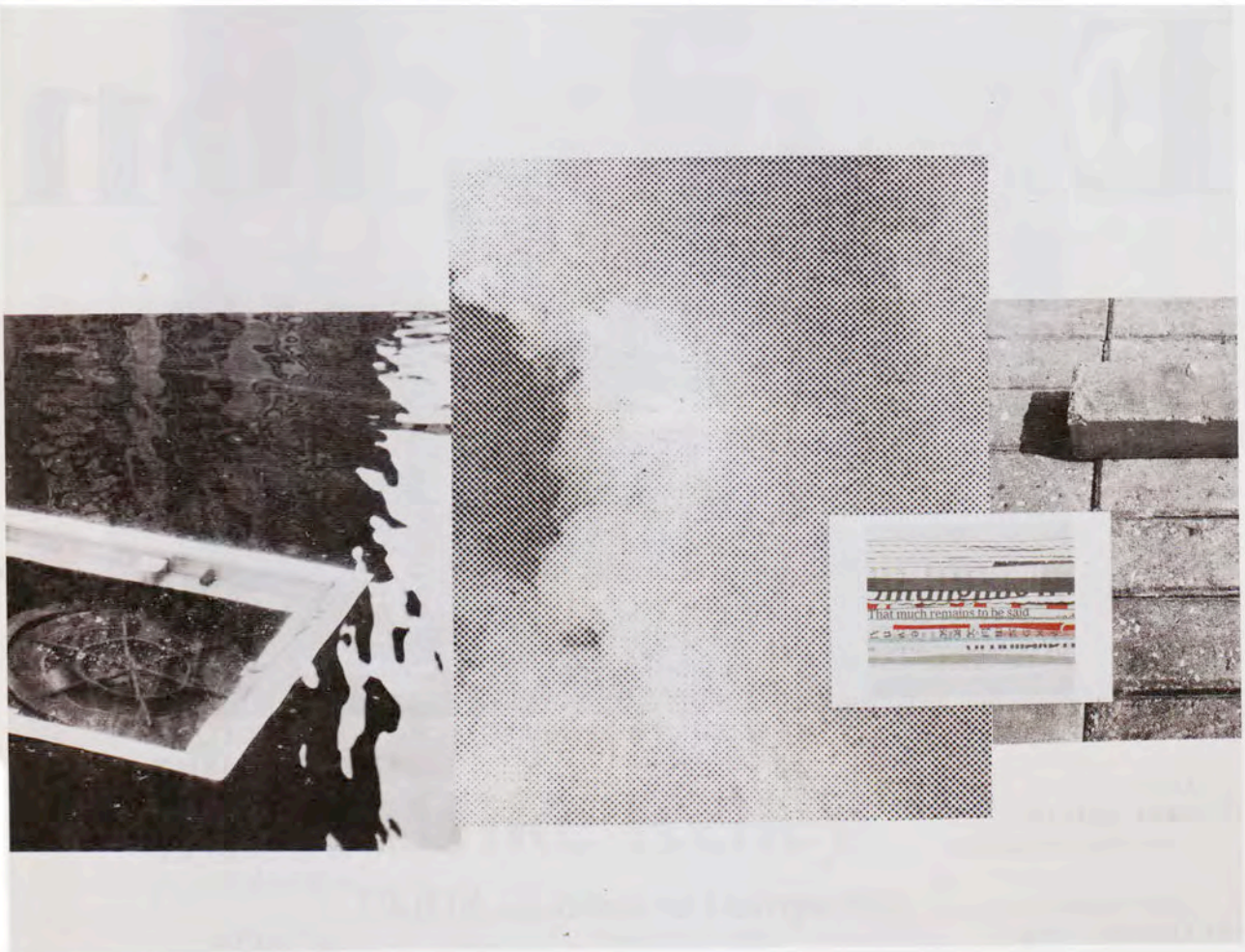
BAUM There is a lot to read in the "Dog Ears"; they are my homage to reading and the role it plays in my art-making. Because my work is so language-centric, it tends to function well on multiple platforms, without being dependent on any one of them. But each platform has its merits. The "Dog Ears" are perhaps more easily read in a book or online, but on the wall their visual texture and materiality, and their relationship to the history and conventions of photography, become more prominent.

STILLMAN In 2010, working on an artist's book titled *Sightings* for Onestar Press, you began your newest series, the "Newspaper Clippings," in which lines of newspaper text are laid out in horizontal bands, one above the next, in tiny collages that are then scanned and enlarged. The images, which are surprisingly colorful, recall William Burroughs's cut-ups. Even more than the "Dog Ears," these works showcase you as a writer, layering short bursts of words.

BAUM I was inspired by billboards I'd seen beside London newsstands, displaying blown-up, headline-screaming newspaper front pages that proclaim ominous portents. To make the "Newspaper Clippings," I cull lines of type from the *New York Times* and rearrange them, aiming to avoid overt references to specific events. I work intuitively, without much regard for the lines' original contexts, interspersing them with other horizontal snippets: bits of color from ads or ink blobs left over from the printing process. Though I use found words, I'm infusing them with my own sensibility, playing on and abstracting the anxieties of our era. In a sense, as with many of my series, I'm fulfilling my childhood ambition to write; but since I'm a photographer, my route is indirect. Working with words that physically preexist, words that have already acquired meanings and uses in

Opposite, *Towel*, 2009, pigment print, 18 by 14½ inches, from the "Naked Eye" series.





View of Baum's exhibition "The Public Imagination," 2011. Courtesy Circuit, Lausanne. Photo David Gagnebin-de Bons.

the world, gives me remarkably direct access to what I want to say.

STILLMAN Because the "Newspaper Clippings" seem so much of our own time, they highlight the fact that your work often evokes the past.

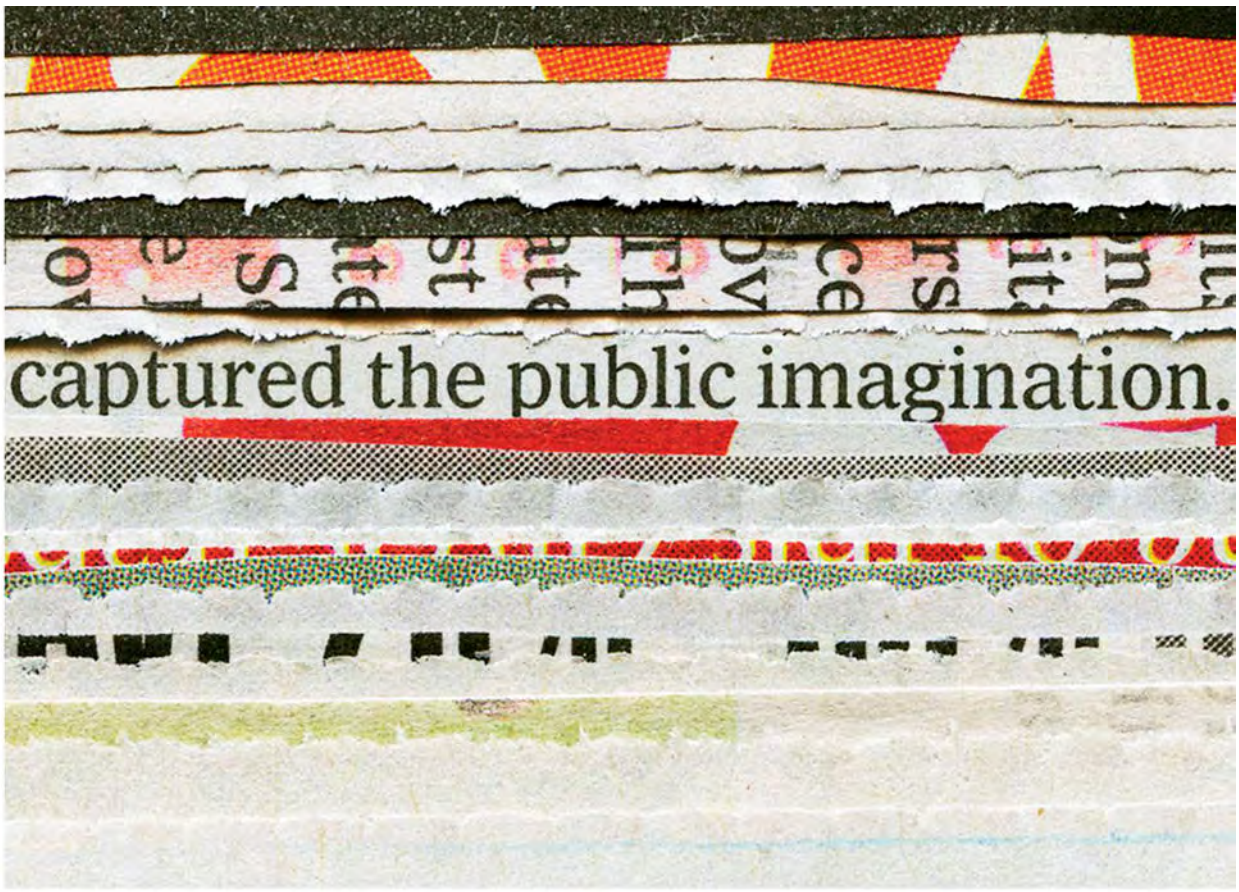
BAUM My work is proof that we live in a time of change. When I began photographing blackboards, card catalogues and books, these objects were established phenomena of everyday life, ubiquitous to the point of near invisibility. My motivation has always been primarily anthropological, but perhaps anthropology, like journalism, can be an early draft of history. If it is the fate of all photographs that the moments they depict and embody are inevitably receding, then the "Newspaper Clippings" are on their way as well.

STILLMAN With your 2011 "Public Imagination" exhibition in Lausanne, you debuted a new installation mode, in which framed "Naked Eyes" and "Newspaper Clippings" hung alongside or on top of large, inexpensively printed black-and-white posters, which were blowups of found sky and cloud photographs and your own landscape and zoo-animal snapshots. In your shows in Paris and Berlin this fall you're planning to continue the strategy of using your own photographs of everyday life for the background posters. Because the physical subject matter of your best-known work is relatively limited, your practice has routinely required keeping large swaths of the world out. What leads you now to let it in?

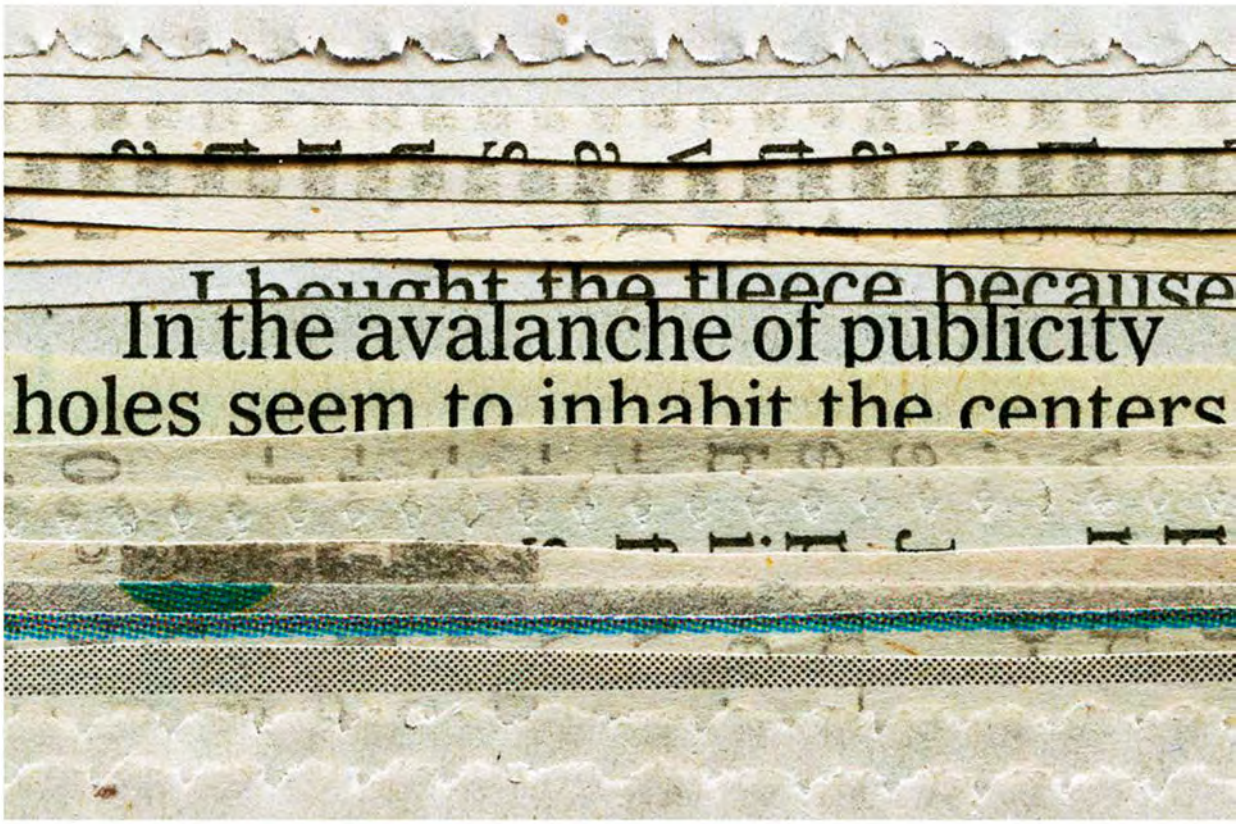
BAUM The title "Public Imagination" is borrowed from one of the "Newspaper Clippings" and is meant to suggest that we are living today in a collective world that is always on the verge of mass hysteria. Introducing blowups of my own snapshots is a way of locating and particularizing our given moment and demonstrating its variety and breadth. Using posters, or focusing on installation formats, is not necessarily where my work is headed—I'm too much a maker of individual photographs for that—but I take great pleasure in multiplying the interactions between images and sparking unexpected implications.

STILLMAN Why have so many of your series remained ongoing?

BAUM I enjoy the counterpoint of having several projects under way at the same time, and they all remain ongoing until I run out of material. In each, I become more demanding as I go along, so progress can be slow. Though I establish the rules, I try never to overcontrol my work process; I want to be excited and surprised by what turns up. ○



The Public Imagination, 2010, pigment print, 11½ by 16 inches, from the "Newspaper Clippings" series.



In the Avalanche, 2013, pigment print, 11½ by 17½ inches, from the "Newspaper Clippings" series.