

## Blue chips

A review of "Unfamiliar Places: A Message from Bill Dane," at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from Nov. 1, 1973, to Jan. 6, 1974.

I've never received a Bill Dane postcard, but friends have, and they've posted them on walls at home or in exhibitions, so I've seen them around. I've also received photo postcards from others, and have sent them myself. "Photographs-through-the-mail" appeals to me. It avoids the preciousness of traditional viewing: spotlights, overmats and interleaves that remind the audience with a heavy hand that This Is Art, and therefore valuable (not that this is meaningful and therefore art).

Bill Dane's method of distribution is an integral part of his art. I was therefore disappointed in the way The Museum of Modern Art chose to exhibit them. Certainly to make slides of the postcards, as was done in this exhibit, was preferable to mounting



*Bill Dane, untitled, no date.*

them on mats with overmats in welded chrome frames hung with precision on spotless white walls. The slides were a way of not getting pristine, but the projector was distracting. A rear projection screen would have been preferable to having a noisy machine on a chunky wooden pedestal, with wrapping cord fencing off the room. Even

then, projecting a 3x5-inch postcard onto a 4x5-foot screen destroys the intimacy of the original object, which is as much a part of its aesthetic as the velvet lined case and shiny silver surface is a part of the aesthetic of a daguerreotype. When reproduced on a printed page, or projected, the jewel-like quality of a daguerreotype

is lost. The picture itself may be interesting, but viewing a copy is not the same experience as encountering the original object.

The format of the original object is even more important in Dane's case, for the daguerreotypist had basically only two technical processes from which to choose. Dane has a multitude. The museum probably couldn't have afforded to send the public thousands of postcards through the mail (besides, that wouldn't have solved the problem of what to exhibit in the third floor space), but they could have been more inventive in their presentation, out of respect for the photographer's choices. Having decided to share Dane's work with the public, they offered only the gist. Perhaps tacking the postcards on cork bulletin boards would have given the viewers some of the intimacy of the originals. Or perhaps they could have mounted the cards on wheels in old stereo viewing cases. Standing, eyes pressed to a viewing window, turning the wheel and having images flip before you would more closely approximate the intimacy and surprise of Dane's work. Also the viewers could have operated the machines at their preferred pace,

avoiding the tyranny of 15-second projection.

The element of surprise is one that makes photographs-through-the-mail so pleasurable. Getting mail is like playing roulette. Some days you get nothing. You lose. Some days, nothing but bills. You lose. Letters and packages are winning chips whose value is determined by their content. Just hearing from some people is blue chips. What they reveal or propose or enclose may bring additional points. Being a visual person, I prefer photographs to long letters, cryptic or witty comments to discourse.

Dane's images as well as the messages on verso are often humorous or cryptic. Some of the messages refer to the images they accompany: "View from the top of our hill, on the other side is San Francisco Bay, Russia, China, Japan, etc. What you see here is the Standard Oil Company." (12 Dec. 72). Others are independent: "Guess I'll work the fall semester and save enough to take off Feb. to Sept. It may even stimulate some character development. I'm always looking for small increments." (10 Apr. 72). Sometimes the images or the thoughts are serialized. In May of 1973, Dane sent five cards of the same park sprinkler in different positions of its rotation. On the fifth one, he promised to turn the water off. An earlier conversation was spaced by days. He started with an observation: "I didn't even stop in El Paso this time. The view across Ciudad Juarez still haunts me. I sometimes avoid situations which produce that feeling of impotent outrage.. impotence is understandable, outrage seems indulgent" (27 Mar. 73).

Then, at the post office's convenience, he adjusted, "Outrage is *inappropriate* approximate" (30 Mar. 73). In April the concern returns:

"For some well known reason I had this tragi-comic fantasy of a physio-aesthetic paralysis which left me out of hysterically struggling to get the shutter released — pounding it with my fist, pressing it against the roof of the car — laughing to tears."

Possibly the Modern felt no obligation to show originals because Dane has rejected the traditional concern for print quality in his work. "It's been said that I'm documenting almost nothing sans technique. I've always been uneasy near compliments" (1 Oct. 73). To many photographers the flat quality of Dane's prints is puzzling, even offensive, but to make his pictures as fine prints would be inappropriate. Fine prints would be silverware at McDonald's or diamonds at a roller derby. Then too, one doesn't risk precious prints in the U.S. mail with only eight cents' protection. What he photographs is ordinary: monuments, parks, fountains,

street corners, road sides, the ubiquitous phone pole and unpopulated stretches of rolling terrain. Even in urban areas, people are seldom included. Motion is implicit in most of his work. It is implied by the presence of streets, roads and highways, in the variety of vegetation and architecture and in the "snapped" quality of framing. Some of the pictures are taken through bus windows, some from cars and some from the hip. "I was running fast when I took this. I didn't notice my head til later" (18 Dec. 72), (a shadow intrudes in the lower edge).

Four years ago William Thacher Dane was a painter. Born in California in 1938, at 30 he received an M.A. in painting from the University of California at Berkeley. He started to photograph in 1970 or, as a postcard in 1971 explained, "I'd been painting for 10 years and then a year or so ago Burbuck showed me some

Bill Dane, *untitled*, no date.



Ed Ruscha photos. Oh Boy! I said." In 1967 he won the Lodi Painting Annual in Lodi, Calif. In 1973, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship for Photography. "Just can't figure this Guggenheim outfit. I *told* them I won the Lodi Painting Annual." (20 Mar. 72).

With the support of the Guggenheim and savings, Dane traveled throughout the United States and Europe, including many short trips from his home in Richmond, Calif., of just a few days to a week. In the last three years he has made postcards from approximately 1500 different negatives and has sent them to a flexible and unsystematic mailing list that has at one time or another included 100 people. These are not traditional postcards, nothing that would please the city fathers. He doesn't look for the best view — nor the worst. They are neither compliments nor criticisms. He is not concerned; he is not attempting to communicate. He is observing, responding. "I'm beginning to enjoy a nice photo schizophrenia — the sort of self-conscious, serious pleasure of picture taking, and then this marvel of artifactual trivia." (16 Oct. 72). "Needless to say I'm on the road with none of the flair & esprit of Kerouac or Frank, just plugging away at the edge of historical monumentalia. Hot dog & Whoopie & Howl." (1 Feb. 73).

— Anne Tucker

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